The Angry Couple: A Qualitative Exploration of how Couple Counsellors Experience being Affected by Working with Conflict

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Abstract

This small scale qualitative study explores an aspect of counselling that textbooks describe as often challenging for the counsellor, that of counselling an angry couple. The particular focus of this study is the experiences and meanings of counsellors who have identified that this aspect of their counselling work has had an impact upon them. Data was collected from five experienced counsellors, using semi-structured interviews. This was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Five main themes emerged, these being labelled: childhood experiences, the disrupted self, a responsibility to manage, managing the impact and the developed self. The findings are consistent with the limited literature available and offer a valuable insight into the voice of the counsellor, a perspective that has been the subject of sparse research. The study indicated that counsellor discomfort with anger within the counselling room was frequently related to childhood experience within the family of origin. The analysis found that client anger commonly resulted in physical sensations in the counsellor, and that although experience moderated the feelings of anxiety experienced by the novice counsellor, some anxiety or discomfort continued to be present. Counsellors could also occasionally experience difficult feelings related to their own unresolved conflict or doubt. The results suggest that perceiving couple conflict heightens the counsellor's sense of responsibility, which fuels a need to contain the emotional impact within the room and to hold the self of the counsellor safely in the face of emotionally strong forces. Managing the impact upon the self of the counsellor can continue after the session with the couple. In the long term however, the work can lead to both professional and personal growth. The relevance of the study outcomes to supervision, training and counsellors' understanding of their own relationship with anger is discussed.

Declaration

"The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course"

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Carola Judith Haywood

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List of Abbreviations

A	Appendix
BACP	British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
DVA	Domestic Violence or Abuse
EFCT	Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
MFT	Marriage and Family Therapy

Glossary

Axiology	"The role of researcher values in the scientific process" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 132).
Countertransference	"The therapist's internal or external reactions that are shaped by the therapist's past or present emotional conflict and vulnerabilities" (Gelos & Hayes, 2007, p.25).
Epistemology	Epistemology can be defined as "theories of knowledge that justify the knowledge building process that is actively or consciously adopted by the researcher" (Gringeri, Barusch & Cambron, 2013, p. 55).
Hermeneutic	"Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.21).
Idiographic	Idiography focuses upon the particular: particular details and particular people (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).
Methodology	"The methodology is the strategy or plan of action that links methods to outcomes and governs the choice of methods" (Welford, Murphy & Casey, 2011, p.39).
Ontology	Ontology is concerned with "the nature of reality and being. More specifically, ontology addresses the following question: What is the form and nature of reality, and what can be known about that reality?" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131).
Paradigm	A paradigm is "a set of overarching and interconnected assumptions about the nature of reality" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 4).
Phenomenological	"Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.11).
Reflexivity	"The process of continually reflecting upon our interpretation of both our experience and the phenomena being studied so as to move beyond the particularity of our previous understanding and our investment in particular outcomes" (Finlay, 2003, p. 108).

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Chapter One

Introduction

Introduction: Personal and Professional Context

This study explores an aspect of counselling that textbooks describe as challenging, that of working with an angry couple. The particular focus of this study is the impact upon the counsellor's self. The words 'counsellor' and 'therapist' will be used interchangeably.

It is suggested that the counsellor's self will inevitably be affected by interaction with the client (Kottler & Carlson, 2005). In discussing the challenges of working with couple conflict, Wallerstein (1990) observes that personal impact is inevitable, as "all human relationships are echoed in some degree in the clinician's life experiences" (p.2). This fuelled my curiosity about what kind of impact working with angry couples may have.

Emotional expressiveness and intense conflict are common within couple counselling (Weeks & Treat, 2001). The counsellor can feel they are "piloting a helicopter in a hurricane" (Bader & Pearson, 2011, p.1), and Doherty (2014) warns that it only takes fifteen seconds of lost control for a session to become a disaster zone. The stakes can seem high, as the counsellor, in failing to contain conflict, risks damaging both the therapeutic alliance and perhaps even the future of the couple's relationship (Doherty, 2002). Difficulties managing conflict can lead therapists to stop working with couples completely (Sharpe, 1997; Weeks, Odell & Methven, 2005).

I joined Relate in 1998 and although already a qualified counsellor, I was unaware, prior to actually experiencing couple work, of just how challenging this type of counselling could be. My subsequent experience of counselling couples led to reflections about my own relationship with conflict; how this influences my client work, how this aspect of the work

may in turn have affected me professionally and personally, and what skills and awareness are needed. I also deliver training to court ordered groups of separated parents who are often angry about being compelled to attend. I became increasingly aware of how calmness and resilience are important qualities in coping with working with anger. Talking to colleagues about managing common couple conflict, one individual stated: “it was like a light bulb going on in my head, as I suddenly realised that this had not been covered in training” (Colleague, 2010).

Having found that working with angry couples brought its own challenges, I wanted an opportunity to learn, reflect further and discover how others experience this. Research has shown that a disclosure of domestic violence or abuse (DVA) may affect the self of the couple counsellor (Artingstall, 2006). I wondered whether counsellors could also be affected by working with couple conflict without DVA disclosures. By excluding consideration of experiences involving DVA I hoped to focus upon the essence of the experience of working with conflict. This area became the focus of my research question, with my past experience bringing “the core of the problem into focus” (Moustakas, 1994, p.104).

Research Aims and Focus

The underlying premise of this research is that some counsellors may be affected by working with couple conflict. The research asks a specific question: what are the experiences of those who feel affected by working with couple conflict without apparent DVA, and what meaning was attached to that experience. The research aims to discover:

- How counsellors describe and understand their reactions.

- Whether, and in what ways working with couple conflict can impact upon the counsellor's professional and personal self.
- The main influences on how the counsellor manages the work.

Potential Value of the Study

Couple counselling has become an important therapeutic sector. During 2012-2013, Relate (the largest United Kingdom relationship counselling organisation) delivered over 240,000 couple counselling sessions, but Relate is only one of several providers (Department of Education, 2014). Many counsellors also work privately, so clearly, significant numbers of counsellors work with couples.

Although couple counselling literature refers to potential difficulties in working with conflict, the reader will note from chapter two that there appears to be a paucity of research evidence specifically on the experience of working with angry couples without evident DVA. It is intended that this study will add to existing knowledge, enhancing understanding of how couple counsellors might experience any professional or personal impact. This study does not attempt to make claims about the general population of couple counsellors, but to look in depth at the experiences of a sample of five experienced counsellors, all of whom felt that working with couple conflict without DVA had affected them in some way.

The literature relevant to this study is reviewed in the following chapter (chapter two), and chapter three describes the methodological approach. Chapter four details the findings, which are located within the literature in chapter five's discussion.

It was hoped at the outset that the study would describe the counsellor experience of the work, could offer perspectives and directions to help support those who are working with couples in conflict, and also signpost avenues for further research. Conclusions are drawn in chapter six.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The Literature Search

This research approach adopted McLeod's (1999) modelling theory: identifying critical concepts as a basis for the initial literature search used to gain ethical approval. An additional search was completed after the analysis of the interviews. A detailed explanation of the search strategy is described in Appendix two (A2).

The search revealed a paucity of research material describing couple counsellor experiencing, and an apparent gap in the research literature related to the experience of the counsellor working with couple conflict. However there was a body of material by clinicians drawing from their personal and supervisory experience, and associated contextual information also emerged. This has been organised into the following themes:

- Conflict in couple counselling
- The supervisor's perspective
- Perception of anger
- Interpersonal influences
- Socio-cultural influences
- Counsellor reactions to anger
- Expression and containment
- Countertransference
- The impact upon the self

Conflict in Couple Counselling

Although this study focused upon the counsellor and not the client, it is relevant to briefly sketch the context within which the counsellor works. Couples often seek counselling as their last hope (Chromy, 2007), approximately half presenting with distress and overt conflict (Tremblay, Wright, Mamodhoussen, McDuff & Sabourin, 2008). Most bring opposing perspectives (Friedman & Lipchick, 1999), 80 percent believing their relationship will end (Department of Education, 2014). Attachment theory suggests that threats to a relationship bond creates anxiety (Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan & Cowan, 2002), and entrenched patterns of rapidly escalating hostility, blame, threats and accusations can form (Morrissette, 2007). As embedded negative interactions are replayed, high amygdala arousal accompanies reduced cognitive functioning (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2003), inducing defensive and aggressive positions, emotional flooding and physiological changes that make resolution difficult (Gottman, 1994). Emotions of shame and anger can lock into escalating spirals of conflict (Retzinger, 1991) in which individuals perceive their partner as essentially bad (Gomez, 1997).

The Supervisor's Perspective

Whereas the individual therapist usually only hears about conflict, the couple therapist may directly witness destructive behaviour (Sharpe, 1997). This can affect the therapist, who may experience the work as chaotic and disturbing (Livingston, 1998). Supervisees may be "visibly shaken by the emotional intensity" (Storm, 2007, p. 227), reactions can be "intense and difficult to comprehend" (Siegel, 1999, p.75) and even portray a "primitive fear of personal and professional invalidation" (Wallerstein, 1990, p.6).

Hill (2009) identifies anxiety as an inevitable response to working with clients in attachment crisis, with anxiety management responses including avoidance, introjection and even conflict escalation. Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) explain how counsellors who feel emotionally challenged, may be unable to curtail internal reflection in order to act therapeutically. They may either defensively retreat from the emotion, or being unable to manage their emotional boundary, find themselves preoccupied with thoughts about the client, their own reaction and the emotional impact.

The supervisor has a pivotal role in encouraging and supporting counsellors to become comfortable with the expression of emotion and in mitigating anxiety about working with couple conflict (Storm, 2007). Hill (2009) suggests that reducing counsellor anxiety about managing strong emotions requires a supervisory relationship offering a 'secure base' in which the influence of the counsellor's own attachment style and reactions can be understood. Anxiety can however inhibit counsellor disclosure in supervision (Mehr, Ladany & Caskie, 2010).

Novice therapists depend primarily upon supervision for skill development and confidence building (Bischoff, Barton & Thober, 2002). Confidence and anxiety are inversely related, with experience and supportive supervision enabling optimism and internally based evaluation of competence (Bischoff & Barton, 2002). However, while pervasive anxiety decreases with experience and confidence increases, this may not prevent recurring loops of anxiety and self-doubt (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Perception of Anger

The self-regulation of emotion involves not only cognitive processes, but sensory-motor, respiratory and autonomic nervous systems, all of which are involved in situations of perceived threat (Warnecke, 2012). Perceiving anger is thought to elicit a defence response (Baas, Carsten, Dieu & Nijstad, 2008), focusing attention onto potential threats and lowering attention to other stimuli (de Jong, Koster, Wees & Martens, 2010). Research demonstrates that under experimental conditions, hearing or observing any anger is negatively arousing: angry faces are detected more quickly than happy ones (Fox, Lester, Russo, Bowles, Pichler & Dutton, 2000); pictures of angry faces are reported as unpleasant, creating heightened startle responses (Springer, Rosas, McGetrich & Bowes, 2007), while audio-recorded anger narrows cognitive capacity and reduces creative capacity (Miron-Spektor, 2009).

Wallin (2007) describes the experience of internal emotions and the world outside self as being essentially a bodily experience. When in contact with another, signals are exchanged that then reciprocally affect the somatic and psychological states of both. As Warnecke (2012) observes: “We speak with our bodies and our bodies resonate with the presence, actions and expressions of others” (p.121).

Not only are we influenced psychically and somatically by clients, they too will subsequently be influenced by our experiencing of them (Wallin, 2007). Rothschild (2004) asserts that the therapist with an emotional client will be automatically affected below the level of consciousness through activated mirror neurons. Firing upon observing the intentional actions of others and neurologically mirroring observed actions, mirror neurons become building blocks in perceiving and understanding the emotions of others (Pitts-Taylor, 2013).

Their role in empathy is controversial (Gerrans, 2010), but Rothschild (2004) suggests they affect the operation of unconscious processes such as countertransference (Glossary). Gerdes (2011) warns that in emotional situations a therapist can be hijacked by the unconscious activation of mirror neurons. Without self-awareness and an ability to self-regulate and take other perspectives, the therapist becomes overwhelmed.

Some argue that mirror neurones enable a form of mind-reading, but Pitts-Taylor (2013) suggests that the information received is not neutral, but moderated by past interpersonal experience. Siegel (1999) emphasises that the counsellor's own personal history and relationship with anger inevitably affects perceptions and reactions to conflict encountered.

Interpersonal Influences

Clulow (2001) argues that the perception of conflict and coping with any resultant internal stress is influenced by attachment processes. Relationships with early caregivers create a prototype for subsequent relational patterns (King, 2006), affect the neuronal structures that embed them (Schore, 2003), influence perception and how perceived stressors are managed internally (Bowlby, 1973). An individual's attachment style automatically influences the perceptual processing of interpersonal information (Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid & Avihou-Kanza, 2009) and affects relational cognitions, emotions and behaviours (Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan & Cowan, 2002). Silva, Soares and Estes (2012) suggest that all emotional information is regulated by the activation of the attachment system, which determines the attention given to emotional information; insecure anxious individuals hyper-activate while avoidant individuals deactivate. This is supported by research showing

that avoidantly attached individuals have difficulty perceiving sadness in others faces (Suslow, Dannlowski, Arold & Ohrmann, 2010).

Wood, Werner-Wilson, Parker and Perry (2012) reviewed studies examining the relationship between the perception of facial expression and attachment style, concluding that attachment style affects both the impact of anger and also how anger is perceived. Their own research (using audio-visual displays of couple conflict) suggested that attachment style influenced the perceived intensity of couple conflict. They found that anxiously attached individuals perceived greater negative affect and less positive interaction, while avoidantly attached individuals perceived minimal negative affect. They warn that a therapist perceiving a situation as stressful activates their own attachment related behaviours, affecting their behaviour with clients and how they self-soothe. The securely attached therapist was more able to remain attuned to the clients even during emotional intensity, while the insecurely attached report increased alliance difficulties (Wittenborn, 2012).

It can be difficult to separate the influences of attachment style and modelled social learning within the family when considering what has influenced personal styles of expressing anger (Halford, Sanders & Behrens, 2000). Research indicates that family communication patterns relating to the expression of conflict creates long lasting influence on how individuals themselves manage conflict (Whitton et al., 2008). An individual's relationship with anger will be influenced by the interaction between their personality, the parental personality, parenting style (Koenig, Barry & Kochanska, 2010), socialisation (Zeman, Perry-Parish & Cassano, 2010) and their adaptation to the emotional system within which they exist (Pocock, 2010).

Although children may not model the anger styles observed within the family, both overt and covert conflict will have an influence. Hidden anger can be detected by young children (Gosselin, 2002), creating a negative impact at any age (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1989), with fear and sadness being common reactions (Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh & Lake, 1991).

The impact of the counsellor's relationship with anger upon the therapeutic work was explored in Sharkin and Gelso's (1993) study of counsellors watching videos of angry clients. This demonstrated that the counsellors' own anger-proneness or discomfort with anger significantly affected their responses. However it should not be assumed that difficult childhood experiences necessarily create difficulties for a counsellor. They may be both helpful and formative in creating a skilled counsellor (Coady & Wolgien, 1996).

Socio-cultural Influences

Socio-cultural factors affect conflict patterns (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). The expression and perception of anger have many influences, including culture (Adam & Shirako, 2013), gender socialisation (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008), social status (Park et al., 2013) and age (Phillips, Henry, Hosie & Milne, 2006; Shallcross, Floerke & Mauss, 2013). Women often feel anxiety and shame about feeling angry, and may contain their feelings, fearing that anger will threaten their relationships (Cox, Van Velsor & Hulgus, 2004). While angry expressions are perceived in a similar way by men and women (as a signal to go away), male anger is universally perceived as more threatening (Seidel, Habel, Kirschner, Gur & Derntl, 2010). Structural bias is pervasive, so assumptions about client gender have been found to alter the

meaning attached to the expression of anger and couple conflict (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Blasko, Winek & Bieschke, 2007).

Socio-cultural assumptions are carried through language (Dallos & Draper, 2000). Language carries overt meaning, but linguistic patterns also perpetuate assumptions and inequalities (Goffman, 1967). For example, socio-cultural factors affect the meaning of the linguistic act of interrupting. Interruptions can exert power and control in a conversation, and may be used by the clients or the therapist attempting to influence communication (Werner-Wilson, Price, Zimmerman & Murphy, 1997). A principal therapist task is to affect a couple's cycle of conflict: this may be a general aim or sometimes require active intervention to stop an escalating argument (Scheinkman, 2008). The meaning of interruptions is moderated by both gender and status (Park et al., 2013), which can affect the dynamics of counselling.

Gender differences may affect the comfort of a female counsellor interrupting a man, or the way they are then perceived by the clients if they do. Interruptions can carry different meanings; a man interrupting a woman may be seen as assertive, but a woman interrupting a man is generally seen as confrontational or disrespectful (LaFrance, 1992). It appears easier to interrupt a woman, as female clients are interrupted three times more than men, whatever the counsellor's gender (Werner-Wilson et al., 1997).

It is suggested that power based gender inequalities are perpetuated within society, are inherent in the intimate couple relationship (Hearn, 1998) and result in much couple conflict (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005). Attachment insecurity can trigger aggression, exerting power as an attempt to dominate and get needs met (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2011). An important

therapist role is to work to balance power in the couple relationship (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008), and so Ward and Knudson-Martin (2012) suggest that without active and directive interventions, inequalities may be perpetuated rather than addressed.

Anger may be learnt as a way of dominating and controlling others (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008) and the counsellor holds in mind the possibility of inequalities within the relationship in the form of DVA. It is estimated that mild to moderate physical aggression occurs in about half of those seeking counselling (Holtzworth-Munroe, Marshall, Meehan & Rehman, 2003). Few couples will spontaneously disclose violence unless asked (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1996) and it is important that couple therapists are able to identify DVA (Johnson & Lebow, 2000). In my clinical experience I have found that when working with angry couples, my concerns about safety and possible DVA become heightened. Even without DVA being disclosed I hold in mind the knowledge that there can never be certainty in safety, and maybe this has an influence when emotions feel uncontained. In view of the possible parallels between the topic of this study and working with cases where DVA has been disclosed, it is worth reviewing some of the literature to see if it provides insights.

The impact upon the counsellor of casework involving DVA can be long-lasting, including vicarious traumatisation (Collins, 2010), secondary traumatic stress and burnout (Kulkarni, Bell, Hartman & Herman-Smith, 2013). Hearing emotionally charged and traumatic issues can potentially disrupt the counsellor's cognitive schemata (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006) and the impact begins with disclosure. Artingstall's 2006 study of couple counsellors found that a DVA disclosure heightened emotional and physical responses, with a sense of becoming more directive, powerful and detached. Identifying this changed therapeutic stance as being

congruent with Lang, Little and Cronen's (1990) model, Artingstall (2006) suggested that disclosure moved the counsellor away from their usual position in the domain of explanation or aesthetics to that of production: to take account of legal, ethical and organisational boundaries.

Counsellor Reactions to Anger

A small number of North American studies have looked at therapist reactions to clients expressing angry feelings. Although the evidence is limited, it would appear that counsellors can have a particular difficulty with client anger. Bandura's (1956) analysis of student therapists' counselling sessions found that 50 percent of counsellors avoided hostile client feelings (such as anger, resentment and criticism). They demonstrated difficulty listening and responding to anger, despite anger not being directed at them.

The perception of stress is determined by the perception of the degree of control over the stressor, which influences psycho-physiological responses, which then affects the choice of coping strategy (Goh, Sawang & Oei, 2010). Perhaps it is therefore unsurprising that in a study of trainee therapists, coping with couple conflict raised anxiety to even higher levels (McCarthy, 2004). It could be argued that this could be associated with novice uncertainty about what constitutes success or failure (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011).

Expression and Containment

The couple counsellor is required to manage complex processes: to simultaneously build a therapeutic alliance with each partner, hold a safe boundary within which painful and inflammatory issues can be explored and to offer sufficient space for emotional expression that may be hard for their partner to hear. While the individual counsellor holds the internal tensions of one client, the couple counsellor holds the tensions of two, plus tensions within the relationship and the couple's tension about their safety within counselling (Clulow, 2001). Couple work can be difficult to structure and control; couples can form stable but dysfunctional systems in which both attend counselling to change the other, conflict can escalate so control of the session is lost and sessions may be terminated prematurely if the level of volatility equals that at home (Weeks, Odell & Methven, 2005).

Anger between a couple and within an individual is often feared as an untameable beast, a 'thing' that needs managing (Roffman, 2004), and an embodied presence often represented as an explosive boiling fluid (Wilkowski, Meier, Robinson, Carter & Feltman, 2009). When clients seek help to contain what they feel they cannot, the unspoken question may be "can the therapist be a good enough parent to contain in a safe way that which is experienced as uncontainable?" (Jenkins, 2006, p.121).

Staying with angry emotions supports clients to process their emotions more fully (Mackay, Barkham & Stiles, 1998), yet a fine line is trod between empathy and activating the couple's fight and flight response (Tashiro & Frazier, 2007). Johnson (2004) suggests that although some couple therapies avoid emotional engagement, it is through accessing and validating underlying emotion that negative interactional cycles and the attachment bond is

restructured. Yet while emotions can be a transformational tool, they need containing to avoid rupturing the therapeutic alliance, the alliance being the instrument through which change is promoted (Sexton, Ridley & Kleiner, 2004; Davis & Piercy, 2007). Uncontained conflict may lead to lost trust and premature termination (Vogel, 1999).

Hinchcliffe (1991) emphasises that creating emotional and physical safety when working with volatile couples requires a clearly boundaried environment. Weeks et al. (2005) also emphasise the importance of a structured directive approach, however the theoretical model influences the approach to balancing containment and emotional expression (Donovan, 1999a). Interventions therefore vary and may include: calming conflict through empathy and congruence (Parker Hall, 2009), validating feelings and reframing the conflict as an external enemy to be overcome (Johnson, 1999), interpreting defensive strategies as connected to family-of-origin or character conflict (Donovan, 1999b), positive questioning (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999), teaching rational restraint rather than aggression (Vogel, 1999), setting ground-rules, cognitive re-focusing, or separating the couple in the session (Weeks et al., 2005). Johnson (2005) suggests that effective couple counsellors feel comfortable with emotional intensity, intervening to reshape interactional positions through slowing the interactional pace and then expanding attachment-related emotions. Whatever the model, balancing containment and expression is likely to involve what Schön (1987) described as the professional artistry of the skilled practitioner, who in challenging situations reflects in the moment, thinking then adjusting actions.

Countertransference

Countertransference encapsulates the intense and confusing emotions generated in response to clients. These reactions are interpersonal, intra-psychic, generally generated out of conscious awareness and may both impede therapeutic effectiveness and offer insight (Brooks-Harris, 2008). Gelso and Hayes (2007) suggest that all therapeutic relationships will inevitably be affected by countertransference and anxiety is usually an indicator of its presence. The roots of countertransference reactions are generally assumed to be found in the counsellor's childhood, current emotional conflicts or gender role conflict (Gelso & Hayes, 2007).

Kaslow (2001) warns that couple work increases the complexity of countertransferential reactions, while Alexander and Van der Heide (1997) warn that working with conflicted couples potentially intensifies countertransferential reactions. It is suggested that the therapist may be weighed down with inappropriate responsibility to make the relationship work, or become sucked into the couple's drama and powerlessness (Duffell, 2004). The therapist may become angry with the client's anger or experience the sense of being a child with warring parents (Leveton, 2005). Duplassie, Macknee and Williams (2008) researched Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) training and countertransference emerged as a potential block. A study participant described her awareness of the relationship between her discomfort with anger and personal issues: "I think I become a bit afraid [of the anger]. The anger, I think that has to do with my own personal discomfort with - guess it's partly being triggered in some things in myself- my own story" (Duplassie et al., 2008, p.8).

Gelso and Hayes (2007) have developed and evaluated a theory about managing countertransference, suggesting that "self-insight, conceptualizing skills, empathy, self-integration and anxiety management skills" (p.95) minimise countertransference. Self-insight, they advise can be fostered through self-observation, mindfulness, reflection and attention to self-care. Self-integration enables the skilful regulation of proximity in the therapeutic relationship, while empathy allows an accurate understanding of the client self without confusing it with their own frame of reference. While conceptualizing skills help the therapist to intellectually contextualise reactions and behaviours, controlling anxiety is described as a central plank in the management of countertransference.

The Impact upon the Self

The creation of a therapeutic environment held securely by an emotionally dependable presence (Clulow, 2010) requires internal therapist calm to steer through the external storm with volatile couples (Jenkins, 2006). Working effectively thus requires the therapist to reduce their own anxiety (Hinchcliffe, 1991). Self-observation is instrumental in regulating thoughts and emotions, and in situations of stress this process either heightens self-observation or reduces awareness of uncomfortable stimuli (Horowitz, 2002). Research shows that anxiety has been found to alter the processing of emotional stimuli (Van Dam, Earleywine & Altarriba, 2012) and interpretation, judgement and decision making (Blanchette, 2010). The therapist's inner conversation (a continual negotiation between the therapist-person and the therapist-role) can be either a useful tool or an impediment in acting therapeutically and managing difficult feelings such as anxiety (Rober, 1999).

Clark (2009) highlights the importance of self awareness and holding onto a clear sense of self, lest blurred boundaries create over-involvement and inappropriate personal responsibility for therapeutic change. Bowen (1994) proposes that maintaining a solid sense of self in stressful situations with others requires sufficient family-of-origin differentiation; emotional objectivity in a therapist requires an understanding of self in relation to the extended family to avoid being pulled into the emotional conflict in couple work. Including family-of-origin reflection about the personal life of the therapist, has however been controversial within systemic training (Smith, 1993).

The relationship between self-awareness and counsellor performance was researched by Ellis, Krengel and Beck (2002). Although self-awareness theory suggests that inwardly directed self-awareness would decrease performance and increase anxiety, they concluded that the complexity of the counselling process requires perpetual movement between objective self-awareness and subjective awareness.

Becoming a counsellor, whether working with individuals or couples, can lead to stress, struggles with personal dilemmas (McGlothlin, Rainey & Kindsvatter, 2005) and feelings of powerlessness (Hildebrand & Markovic, 2007). Even the experienced may question their competence (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005). A study by Thériault, Gazzola and Richardson (2009) concluded that self doubt and insecurity are common, and can lead to reliance upon a theoretical role or technique, retreat, or intense focus upon session process. Feelings of incompetence were frequently seen as evidence of inadequacy and a taboo subject to discuss.

Studies indicate that counsellors may find it difficult to acknowledge problems within themselves and to seek support (Evans & Payne, 2008). Disclosing perceived inadequacy, even with a supportive supervisor, can engender feelings of shame (Yourman, 2003). Although the demands of the work can impact emotionally and physically (Figley, 2002), counsellors are often better at caring for others than themselves (Shallcross, 2013); working at wellness, using strategies such as journaling or supervision, is essential (Venart, Vassos & Pitcher-Heft, 2007).

A limited number of studies explore the general impact of couple work upon the self of the counsellor. The specific effects of working with conflict are rarely mentioned, although one study found it could generate a greater ability to see multiple perspectives (Paris, Linville & Rosen, 2006). Research by Montagno, Svatovic and Levenson (2011) suggested positive outcomes for those working with couples, finding long term changes in intimate relationships, decreased avoidant attachment behaviours or increased attachment security. Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) training has been found to change inter-personal relating through improved communication skills, greater awareness of personal needs and greater clarity about relational boundaries (Paris et al., 2006). Rhodes (2011) also found positive outcomes, with MFT training increasing personal responsibility in relationship interaction. In Logue's (2002) study of Relate couple counsellors, she found increased assertiveness, enhanced openness to addressing unmet needs and altered power within personal relationships. Flynn-Piercy's study (2002) of Relate counsellors found personal growth, greater emotional honesty, enhanced communication skills and increased intimacy.

Client work also had the potential to highlight unresolved personal and relationship issues. Guy (1987) asserts that therapists can become authoritarian, moody and manipulative in intimate relationships and Flynn-Piercy (2002) found it could stir conflict in personal relationships. One study participant stated that she "sometimes found herself going home and having the same argument with her partner as her clients had engaged in with each other" (Flynn-Piercy, 2002, p.36). Siegel (1999) describes possible negative effects ensuing from working specifically with couple conflict as being a change in world view about relationships and uncertainty about love and intimacy beliefs.

An American study demonstrated reflexivity between personal and professional lives. When clinical work forced therapists to deal with personal issues, personal growth fuelled clinical growth (Paris et al., 2006). Protinsky and Coward's (2001) research echo this, finding that a marker of resilience in the experienced MFT therapist was achieving integration of the personal and professional self.

Conclusions

While it is possible that the voice of the counsellor working with couple conflict has been recorded in research, an extensive search has found limited work in this area and a gap in the understanding of the counsellor experience. It is hoped that my research will start a conversation in which the voice of the counsellor brings their phenomenological experiencing of this work to the fore and illuminates the essence of this specific aspect of the work.

The literature review suggests that conflict, a common feature of couples work, can be challenging and sometimes disturbing for the counsellor; it is striking that many of the areas reviewed above, also apply to working with other strong emotions. The principal areas considered have been: factors affecting the perception of emotion, influences upon the counsellor's own relationship with that emotion, managing emotional depth, countertransference and the impact upon the self of the counsellor.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The Research Paradigm

Academic research requires a methodological approach to seek knowledge in answer to a research question (Burns, 2000). Methodology provides the rationale for the methods used (Carter & Little, 2007) and is optimally chosen to align with the nature of the knowledge sought and the researcher's philosophical stance (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999).

Methodological approaches derive from research paradigms (Glossary), containing epistemological (Glossary), ontological (Glossary) and axiological (Glossary) assumptions. These philosophical assumptions influence the form of the research question, emerging knowledge and the context within which findings are framed (Vandenberg, 2010). A transparent paradigm thus allows better understanding and judgement of the research (Gringeri, Barusch & Cambron, 2013).

Research paradigms emerge from antipodal quantitative and qualitative traditions. These diverse positions about the nature and justification of knowledge and reality bring their own difficulties and strengths to research (McGrath & Johnson, 2003) and arguably both are needed to fully capture human experience (Brink, 1995). The quantitative position views reality as a single stable truth ascertained through empirically testing propositions; knowledge as objective, value free, causally connected and generalisable (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In contrast, in the qualitative relativist position there are multiple, changing, subjective realities (Bunniss, 2010), knowledge being seen as co-created in a psychosocial context shaped by values (Hansen, 2004). These different traditions have generated methodologies with their own paradigm differences and typical methods; there is not uniform agreement on terminologies or classification systems and some methodologies

may even use both qualitative and quantitative methods (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). A3 gives an example of a four paradigm framework derived principally from Bunniss and Kelly (2010).

A qualitative framework matched the study aims: to capture highly personal subjective phenomena, to form understanding from the participants own individual perspectives (Elliot et al., 1999) and to gain rich understandings rather than attaining generalisability (McNeill, 2006). The phenomena of interest are abstract and deeply personal and the situations in which these are experienced would be difficult to standardise.

This research is about a relationship with a relationship so it seems apposite to choose a qualitative approach viewing data as social constructions (Miller & Fox, 2004). The absence of substantial relevant research also indicates a qualitative approach, allowing directions to be signposted without expectations (Willig, 2008). The principal assumptions underlying qualitative research echo my own beliefs about the creation of meaning as socially constructed, recursive and requiring contextual understanding, with language as the primary unit. In conclusion, there appeared a strong case for choosing a qualitative approach for this study.

The Research Methodology

An emergent design was congruent with aspiring to have no prior assumptions about the outcome and allowed the possibility of emerging data to inform subsequent research design. The qualitative methodology chosen was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); an

approach endeavouring to examine the subjective conscious meaning of lived experience without predetermined categories.

IPA draws upon idiographic (Glossary), phenomenological (Glossary) and hermeneutic (Glossary) traditions (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), to explore an individual's subjective engagement with a significant aspect of their life experience and how they make sense of that experience (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The idiographic aspect focuses upon the particular: the distinct detail and the individual experience and meaning (Smith et al., 2009). However the particular is also acknowledged as situated within the whole, recognising the interplay between context and component parts, description, meaning, and interpretation (Willig, 2008). While any claims are necessarily tentative and cautious, "the detail of the individual also brings us closer to significant aspects of the general" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32).

The phenomenological aspect of IPA draws from the writings of philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger to seek understanding of individual experience in a process in which meaning is central to the experience: "the meaning which is bestowed by the participant on experience, can be said to represent the experience itself" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 33). Experience is viewed as subjective, as accessed through interpretation and never objectively captured (Spinelli, 2005). Making sense of the participant's attempts to make sense of their experience and ascertaining what it means to have these views in the participant's world, requires the IPA researcher themselves to use a process of interpretation; the participants world is viewed as directly inaccessible (Larkin et al., 2006). The researcher engages in "a

double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3).

Interpretation is viewed not as a finite linear journey, but a dynamic and constant process. Each part is understood within the context of the whole, the whole is understood in relation to the part in an expanding circle of ideas (a concept termed 'the hermeneutic circle' by Schleiermacher in 1833) (Rapport & Wainwright, 2006). This concept underpins the methods utilised in IPA: the process being an iterative dialogue between the smallest unit of meaning and the wider context of each interview as meanings emerge. The analyst has the potential to reveal meanings hidden within the text of which the author was unaware (Smith et al., 2009).

Reflexivity (Glossary)

It can be argued that the flaws of qualitative research are inherent within its strengths; descriptions of rich personal experience are gained at the cost of being contaminated by researcher subjectivity (Brink, 1995). Although Spinelli (2005) suggests that objectivity can never be achieved nor subjectivity completely removed, qualitative researchers generally agree that bringing subjective preconceptions into awareness is a necessary part of creating validity within qualitative research (Chan, Yuen-ling & Wai-tong, 2013).

Finlay (2008) describes Husserl's proposition that pure observation requires a bracketing of the observer's preconceptions; a process she views as a tension between openness and restraint in needing both a "process of retaining a wonder and openness to the world while reflexively restraining pre-understandings" (p.1).

Although Giorgi (2011) claims a lack of clarity about how the IPA researcher frees themselves from their preconceptions, Smith et al. (2009) accept that preconceptions can never be fully removed, but through a cyclical reflexive engagement with the text, relevant preconceptions are illuminated, casting new light upon the text. Thus the researcher is paradoxically asked to both reflexively engage and reflexively practice restraint to increase understanding.

Through a reflective and reflexive process the researcher aims to identify their assumptions, an ongoing process throughout the research. Perhaps the reader may discern assumptions of which the researcher is unaware, but it is hoped that supervision will have minimised this. In the spirit of striving for openness, it is congruent to describe the personal frame of reference within which this research enquiry emerged (Moustakas, 1994), as transparency underpins validity (Paulus, Woodside & Zieglar, 2008). This offers the reader opportunity to discern possible researcher bias (Elliot et al., 1999).

Having worked as a counsellor since 1994 I am immersed in the culture of counselling and recognise this could influence the research. I currently work with Relate, use an integrative approach and have been recently influenced by EFCT training.

Although initially uncertain with how directive to be with arguing couples and how to achieve a healthy power balance in the room, experience brought confidence and enhanced skills when working with conflict. However as an experienced counsellor, my confidence and commitment to the work was shaken when a couple launched into intense quarrelling, so difficult to contain that I ended the session prematurely, feeling exhausted, impotent and de-skilled. I began wondering whether I had the stamina for couple work. Supervision helped

reposition me and the case progressed, however I began to reflect upon the personal meanings drawn from working with conflict.

In conceptualising this research, an emotional connection with the topic betrayed a raft of preconceptions; the first stage of bracketing these being to identify assumptions through written reflection and in discussion with colleagues (A4). Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggest preconceptions are reduced if the literature review follows the data collection, however sufficient material was needed to gain ethical approval. The full search was completed later after data analysis.

A reflective journal tracked personal reactions to the research process (A5), seeking to discern any lack of neutrality (Ahern, 1999). This recorded thoughts and feelings after interviews (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) and emotional reactions to the whole process. The journal also reveals the research experience itself influencing the researcher, which A1 summarises.

The Sample

The study was based upon a non-probability purposive sampling of counsellors who felt impacted by working with couple conflict, a homogenous group enhancing the possibility of capturing full experiential descriptions for a particular group. The final sample included five participants; a sample size of three to six counsellors being sufficient size for this level of research using IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

The development of criteria measures (Moustakas, 1994) formed the basis of a questionnaire (A11) to identify participants with potentially data rich material (Denscombe, 2003). It was hoped to include variation in gender as the literature indicated that this may influence reactions to working with conflict.

As the study progressed, minor revisions to the inclusion criteria were discussed and agreed with my research supervisor. The final requirements being that participants:

1. **Feel affected in some way by working with angry couples**
2. **Have a recognised qualification in couple counselling.** An assumption was made that specific training equipped counsellors for this work. Training could be either:
    - A counselling diploma and a couples counselling training equivalent to the Relate conversion course for qualified counsellors, or
    - A couples counselling training to at least the standard of the Relate University Advanced Diploma.
3. **Have at least three years experience of clinical work with couples.** Although counsellor development is life-long, with three years of experience they should be functioning professionally, and novice anxiety about clinical practice is likely to have diminished (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).
4. **Have been in supervised practice three years prior to the interview.** This criterion was changed from one year to three in accord with the BACP register requirements and after discussion with my supervisor.
5. **Be a member of a professional organisation with a recognised ethical code.** In seeking counsellors who work professionally and ethically, participants were required

to uphold an ethical code such as that of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2010) and have their practice supervised.

6. **Are not unable to work due to work stress.**
7. **Have access to personal therapy**. As the interview process could engage the therapist with sensitive material it was a requirement that participants stated that they could access personal therapy.
8. **Have had training and experience of casework involving domestic violence and abuse.** This criterion was included after review by the Relate ethics board to support the likelihood of participants being able to differentiate between common couple conflict and an abusive relationship.

Recruitment of Participants

The recruitment strategy used a mix of national and local advertising (A14). My five participants were not recruited from my Masters cohort or my own branch of Relate. Respondents were sent a letter (A8), information about the research (A9) and the questionnaire (A11). There were eight enquiries; five women remained interested and responded via e-mail or telephone. All chose to be interviewed in their home or workplace. Interviews were preceded by answering participant questions, checking consent, reminding the participants about the aims of the interview and their right to withdraw or stop the interview.

Protecting confidentiality has required giving minimal descriptions of participants' contextual details. Exact years of experience or details of training would have deductively

identified individuals: some participants have told colleagues of their participation in the study and the community of couple counsellors is relatively small.

The participants were all female, working in England or Wales, trained to diploma level or above and members of recognised professional bodies. Their counselling experience ranged from 4-26 years, thus all were experienced counsellors (Martin, Slemon, Hiebert, Hallberg & Cummings, 1989). All have worked for (or taken referrals from) the charitable sector, four have also worked in the National Health Service and in private practice. Four were trained psychodynamically, three systemically and one uses an integrative model based upon Egan. Three have had additional training in other models (e.g. Narrative Therapy, EFCT and Transactional Analysis).

Table 1: Participants' experience

Participant pseudonym	Years of couple counselling experience
Anna	≤ 10
Beth	≥ 10
Cath	≥ 10
Dana	≤ 10
Ella	≥ 10

Data Collection

The data collection method was a single semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview offered some consistency between interviews, yet followed the participant's main concerns so that unexpected data could emerge (Smith et al., 2009). Following the guidelines of Maykut and Morehouse (1994) an interview guide was developed using broad open-ended questions (A13).The main category descriptions considered:

- Counselling session experiences (particularly feelings, behaviours and internal dialogue between different aspects of self (Rober, Elliott, Buysse, Loots & De Corte, 2008).
- Influences upon the counsellor's reaction to working with conflict
- Whether this has created change in the counsellor self.

The questions followed Green and Thorogood's (2009) guidelines to be open, non-leading, non-judgemental and experience based. Responsiveness to the individual participant required flexibility with question formulation and order (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). A pilot interview checked timing, trialled questions and gained feedback on interview skills. Interviews lasted between forty five and eighty minutes, excluding debriefing time afterwards.

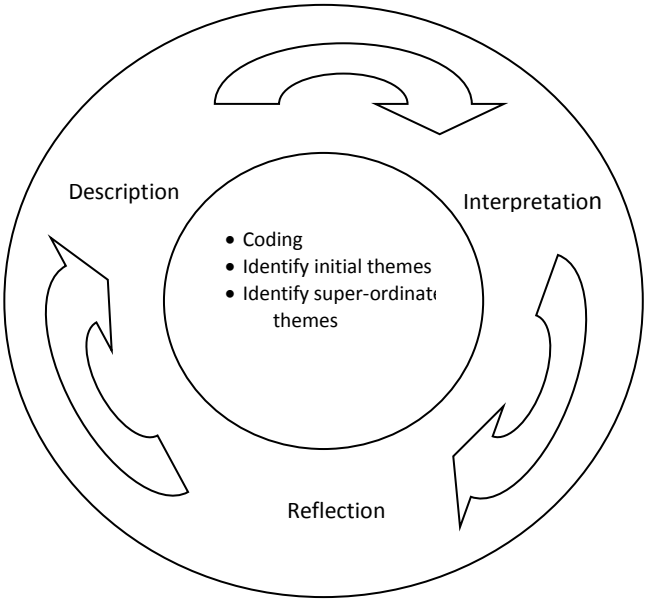
Data Analysis

While IPA is a creative process, for a novice researcher it is useful to follow a guide. This research followed the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009). Transcription and analysis began after completing all the interviews, to reduce cross-contamination.

Repeated readings helped immersion and formed initial impressions before beginning a stepped process of analysis of each participant's interview. Interrogating the text for phenomenological features highlighted key experiences, features of that experience and the possible meanings for the participant. A constant tension existed in remaining faithful to what could be identified from the text while seeking deeper interpretive meaning in attempting "a synergistic process of description and interpretation" (Smith et al., 2009 p.

92). Reflection and reflexivity helped identify researcher preconceptions and ground interpretations from the descriptive text within an iterative process, as illustrated in the diagram below (adapted from lecture notes; Shaw, 2010, IPA workshop at Aston University).

Diagram 1: A stepped, but iterative process



Focused textual coding aimed to identify emergent themes. A15 gives coding examples and A16 illustrates themes emerging from a coded text. This initial process is outlined below.

Table 2: The initial process

Step A	Step B	Step C
Transcribe the interview and Insert text with line numbers into the first cell in the table.	Code the text using: A. Unfocused comments B. Descriptive notes C. Linguistic detail D. Conceptual comments E. De-contextualisation F. Tentative researcher interpretation.	Identify emergent themes from the coded comments, seeking emerging patterns and interpretations of the personal meaning within the context. Tentative thematic labelling was created and then reconsidered within the context of the whole text.

After identifying emergent themes, the theme list (A17) was broken down and re-grouped into meaning clusters, some attracting, others repelling each other. Categories emerged: theme titles were developed for abstractly connected clusters, single themes subsumed, others elevated into super-ordinate theme status. Theme labels were pinned onto a pin-board to facilitate an extended process of organising and reflection (A18). Microsoft Word was used to compile files of thematic evidence. As the analysis progressed, configurations developed (A19).

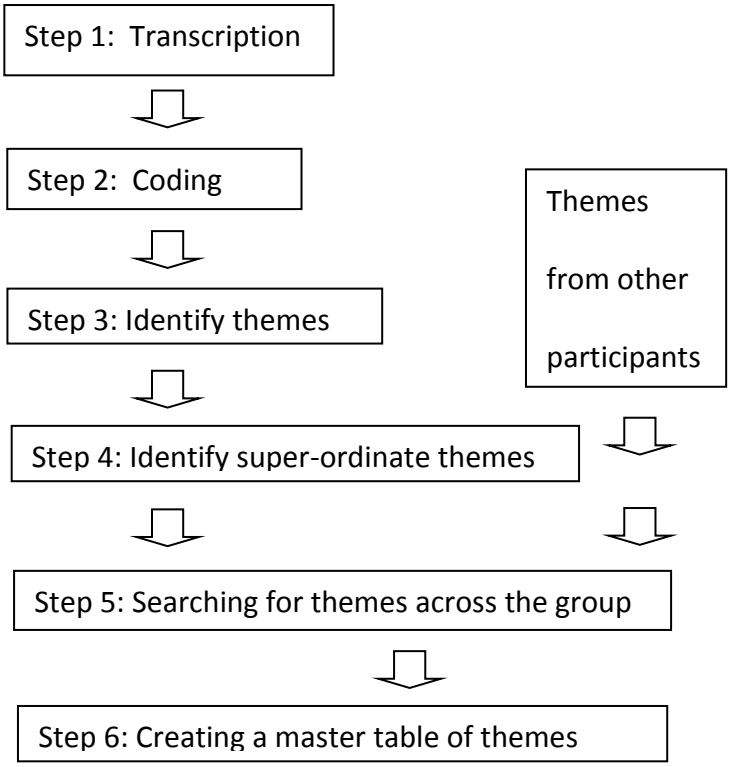
After completing each interview I attempted to bracket those findings before the next analysis. Developing understanding was an iterative process; each analysed part informed the whole and each individual analysis sometimes illuminating meanings in the next or previous analysis. No single analysis was complete until the set was complete. A20 documents the individual analyses.

After all the cases were analysed the final phase of analysis was creating a master table of super-ordinate themes. Integration of the summary tables was a cyclical process with constant checking of master themes against the transcripts until shared themes were identified and placed within master themes, the remainder incorporated or dismissed *(*Willig, 2008).

This iterative process led to overarching thematic patterns emerging towards the conclusion of the process. Function, frequency and significance were noted; diagrammatic representation helped conceptualisation of emerging master themes (A21) until a final

gestalt for the group formed a master table of themes (A22). Despite this being an iterative process, the principal phases of IPA analysis are represented lineally below.

Diagram 2: The principal phases of IPA analysis



Although grounded in the data the process remained subjective and it was difficult to attempt to categorise the richness of participants' experiences in a single dimension. The five final super-ordinate themes were contributed to by all participants, sub-themes being contributed to by three or more participants. Findings are reported in the following chapter.

Validity

Research holds little value if deemed invalid, but validity markers for qualitative studies differ from those of quantitative research (Smith et al., 2009). McLeod (1994) suggests that data conceptualisation, data authenticity, critical data evaluation, contextualisation, reflexivity, procedural description and triangulation underpin qualitative validity. The reader can judge whether the findings and discussion chapters adequately demonstrate the first three criteria; the final criterion is difficult to demonstrate with a single methodology, although the literature review offers limited triangulation.

Demonstrating sensitivity to context is of particular importance within IPA, whether through engagement with the literature, the interview interaction, data analysis or through conclusions supported by participant extracts (Smith et al., 2009). This research is contextualised within the counselling world, however conceptual generalisability is generated through comparisons within and between data as well as with the wider context, which supports validity (Green & Thorogood, 2009).

Denscombe (2003) emphasises the need to recognise the influence of the researcher's own self within the research. Through reflexively examining my own reactions and input (as previously described), I hoped to manage my own countertransferential reactions to the research itself and limit bias and distortions (Heron & Reason, 1981).

Claims to validity require transparency and rigour, especially as Giorgi (2011) criticises IPA as a method lacking reproducibility of results. Systematically creating an independently verifiable and comprehensive audit trail illuminates the procedure and reasoning behind the

analysis. While a full independent audit as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) was not practical and offering the reader full access to the complete coded transcripts would compromise anonymity, some aspects were independently reviewed: through member checks, providing the research supervisor with a coded transcript and through a co-researcher checking themes against in vivo quotes.

Conclusions can only be drawn for the particular sample used and any conclusions are themselves interpretive. The research design makes generalisations difficult to sustain, but could sensitise the reader to the topic and indicate directions for more extensive studies. A6 illustrates an overview of the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from both The University of Chester and from Relate; their conditions were included in the research design.

Ethical considerations underpin the research process; responsibilities to participants and public continue beyond the publication of the dissertation. Bond's (2004) guidelines draw from the values underpinning the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework (BACP, 2010) to highlight the researcher's responsibilities: to client–practitioner relationships, to respect individuals and to enhance professional knowledge. Issues of ethical orientation, confidentiality, risk, relationship with participants, research integrity and research governance all pertain to ethical research practice (Bond, 2004).

The possibility of adverse impact upon research participants has been considered in upholding the principle of non-maleficence (BACP, 2010). Although judging that the probability of harm to participants was less than would be encountered in the participants work, I debriefed, offered a list of local counsellors to mitigate potential difficulties and obtained liability insurance for additional participant protection.

McLeod (1994) emphasises the importance of ensuring informed consent based upon "competence, provision of adequate information and voluntariness" (p.169). To achieve this, a number of strategies were used: a research supervisor monitored researcher competence, participants voluntarily responded to advertisements, participants received no financial incentive and dual relationships were avoided. Information about the research (including that the results would be available in the public domain) was given to potential participants (A9) and written consent was obtained prior to agreeing to be interviewed (A12).

Participants were informed verbally and in writing of their rights to amend or exclude material and to withdraw from the research at any time during the research without explanation. Identifying details were removed during transcription and contextual information has been aggregated to prevent "deductive disclosure of the identity of participants" (Bond, 2004, p.10). Participants had the opportunity to review their interview transcript and withdraw material.

Although offered the option of choosing a pseudonym for the interview, none did. Participants were allocated codes A-E. Although this provided anonymity, I felt this

objectified participants, so each code letter was allocated a four letter name starting with the code letter. The in vivo quote was identified through the line number e.g. Anna/89.

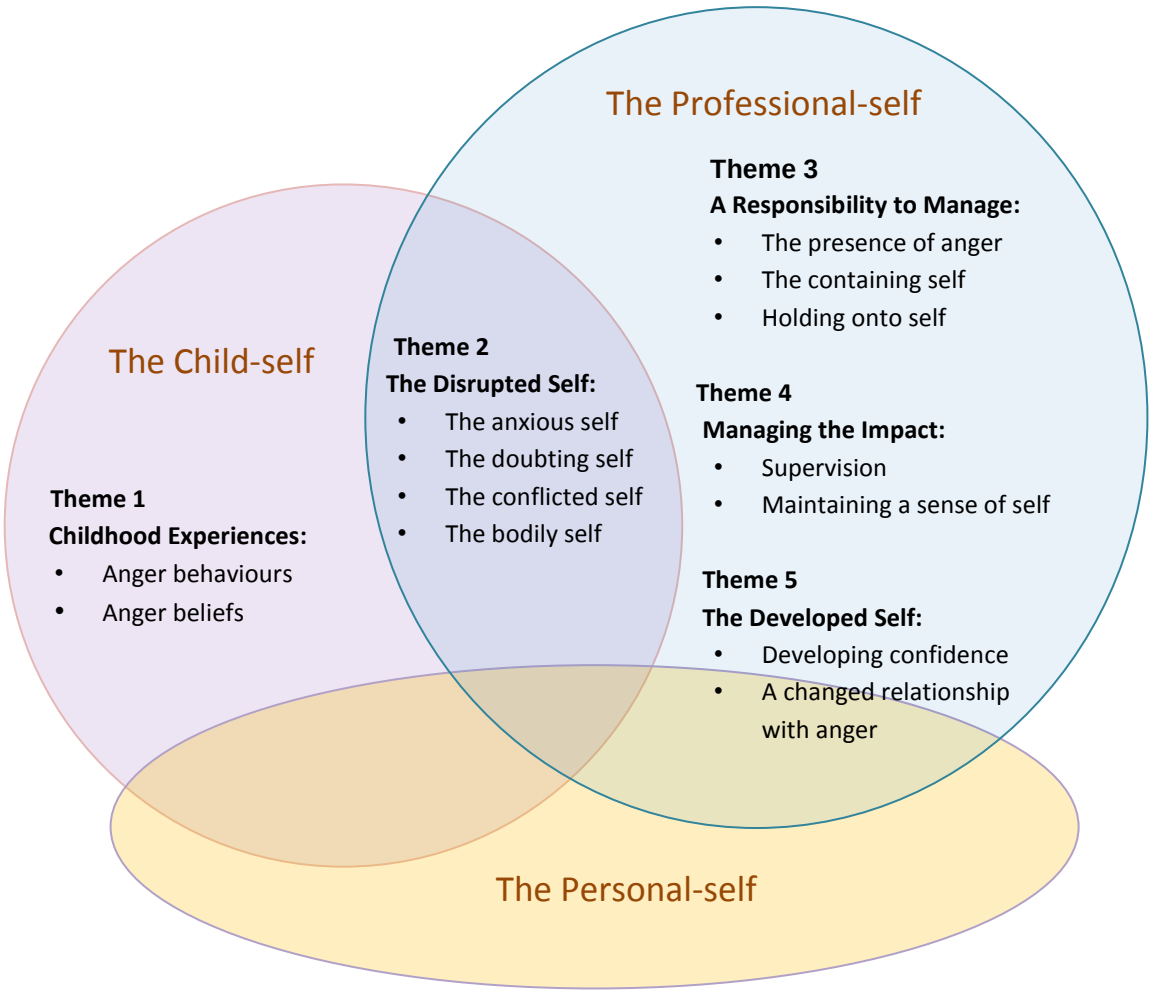
Data protection utilised several strategies, e.g. a password protected USB stick, an encryption package, a locked cabinet and consent records securely stored away from the data generated. Interviews were recorded electronically and on tape, digitally transferred to secure electronic storage and originals deleted. Transcriptions were undertaken by the researcher, using the researcher's password protected personal computer. The individual who cross checked coding signed a data protection confidentiality form (A7). Participants were asked to choose a delivery method for member checks on the anonymised transcribed interview (A10), allowing them to balance the level of security they required with convenience. At the end of the research hard copies will be shredded and data will be securely stored electronically for five years before destruction.

Chapter Four

The Research Findings

Master Themes and Sub-themes

Diagram 3: Master themes and sub-themes



Each theme will be described using italicised illustrative quotes from the participant interviews. The Transcript notation:

- Identifies the quote by combining the participant pseudonym and the transcript line number e.g. (Anna/102).
- Identifies explanatory material added by the researcher as enclosed by [ ].
- Identifies omitted original text with ...

The interviews beautifully illustrated meaning as a process of co-creation (Etherington, 2004). Before considering their experience, rich descriptions were prefaced with expressions of uncertainty such as:

> *It's hard to know what one does oneself.* (Beth/160)

> *I don't think I've thought about it this deeply before.* (Ella/114)

New meanings emerged as experience was explored more fully:

> [The interview] *Stirred me in a challenging, thinking, considering, a wary, a kind of aware kind of way. So I think I'll be watching and noticing me and anger and clients, and stories.* (Ella/787-790)

> *I have learnt a lot more about myself... I did not realise I could not end them... there was something on giving up on them as a couple that I couldn't do... and the responsibility for it all.* (Cath/645-651)

> *I feel a bit further along in understanding that stuff about gender and women's anger. What I am left with is a feeling of sadness and I'm wondering whether that's realising more (OK), how my reactions and responses relate more to what I saw with my mother.* (Anna/430-438)

Five master themes incorporating associated sub-themes emerged from the analysis. The themes were placed within a dynamic interacting framework of different selves, a common narrative thread highlighting differences between the child-self, the professional-self and the personal-self. The interactions between those different selves were identified as potentially both valuable and as sources of tension:

> *I value that kind of straddling that kind of child self and the emotional reactions and that professional self.* (Anna/78-79)

> *It would be negligent to think it doesn't impact on us in our own lives and our relationships.* (Ella/650-651)

All the participants felt that they had been affected in some way by working with couple conflict since completing their initial couple counselling training.

Theme 1

Childhood Experiences

Summary: Childhood experiences affected the meaning of conflict

All the participants described (without prompting), how anger was managed within their childhood family. The table below offers a snapshot summary of individual experiences; the context within which each participant first began to make meaning from witnessing conflict.

Sub-theme: Anger Behaviours

Table 3: Childhood experience of conflict

Participant	Childhood experience of conflict	Described impact on self
Anna	Arguments between father and sister.	*Helplessness.* (Anna/49) [I became] *emotionally avoidant.* (Anna/96)
Beth	Mother: covert anger. An anger avoidant family: *We kept it all bottled up and we would not get angry.* (Beth/329)	[It felt like]*Torture .*(Beth/404) *I used to pacify.* (Beth/314)
Cath	Parental arguments: *Explosions.* (Cath/619)	*A wish to help my parents separate.* (Cath/499)
Dana	An angry father.	*I was afraid of my father until the day he died.* (Dana/304) *I used to think people were angry with me when they weren't.*(Dana/199)
Ella	An anger avoidant family: *Sulky and broody.* (Ella/19)	[It] *disables me from being OK with anger.* (Ella/21) [Anger was] *the end of the world.* (Ella/684)

The participants' experiences were very different. Whatever the behaviour witnessed, the descriptions convey a powerful impact. Anna described a continuing influence:

> *When anger is there in the room, there is a lot that goes on for me with how I grew up with understanding and receiving anger.* (Anna/74-75)

Sub-theme: Anger Beliefs

All described childhood beliefs influencing their work with couple conflict. A common narrative, focused upon the potential destructiveness of anger and needing to either avoid or transform it.

For those with avoidant beliefs their early experiences of encountering anger in work proved difficult. For three participants the perceived threat from anger was to the individual self: annihilation (Anna), physical hurt (Dana) and self worth (Beth). For Ella, anger's threat was to destroy not just the self but the whole family, as arguments led to rejection. Her family script directed:

> *Try not to fight at all costs. It's a powerful message.* (Ella/756-758)

Anna and Dana were affected by the angry person's gender:

> *There's a big risk* [of rejection] *when a woman gets angry.* (Anna/216-232)

> *I don't think I'm afraid of women, even if they are angry, not to the same extent anyway. Maybe I am afraid of angry people, but much more men than women... and a desire to protect the woman.* (Dana/56-66)

For Cath, the experience of watching her parents argue created a longing for resolution and her early experiences of working with angry couples were full of hope:

> *A lot of us go in with a bad internal couple and we are wanting to resolve that I think, by trying to understand couples or to work with them, and that's why deep down there must be a feeling that something can get resolved.* (Cath/66-74)

Theme 2

The Disrupted Self: Experiencing Negative Valence

Summary: Working with couple conflict can feel a negative experience

Gelso and Hayes (2007, p.74) define the valence dimension as reflecting "the extent to which the therapist experiences positive or negative feelings, thoughts, visceral reactions, and/or images in the moment about the patient, and toward anything that is transpiring in the hour or even outside of the hour".

Some participant experiences are described as unusual; others (such as physical reactions) are commonplace. The experience of negative valence has the potential to affect the counsellor's sense of self in a negative way, but may either hinder or support the therapeutic process.

Sub-theme: The Anxious Self

Although anxiety is a theme for all participants, the focus of anxiety varied. First experiences of working with couple conflict remained strong memories:

> *Traumatised.* (Ella/11)
>
> *Very frightening.* (Beth/29*)*
>
> *I used to be quite anxious until I identified it and I suppose I was still anxious then.* (Dana/188-189)

Four participants described continuing anxiety with couple conflict:

> *Very unsafe.* (Cath/138)
>
> *Unsettled and anxious.* (Dana/384-385)

*He might go too far... hitting me, breaking something. (*Dana/50-51)

I feel more anxious... somehow there's a big risk when a woman gets angry. (Anna/217-220)

[Anxiety about] *safety here in the room, and there's safety in the building... I think you just become hyper vigilant.* (Ella/382-387)

Concerns about noise travelling beyond the room and affecting others were expressed by three participants. Cath worried about her neighbours. A neighbour had complained about what he termed:

'The screamers'... and I used to worry because there was a family with small children next door [who might be upset by] *that sort of shouting.* (Cath/150-156)

Sub-theme: The Doubting Self

All the participants expressed doubts: about professional expectations, professional adequacy, or for Cath about the effectiveness of couple counselling. Some doubts were transitory, others more significant.

For Cath and Ella, the interview led to thoughts about professional expectations and how they were being judged in the interview; at times momentarily apologetic for what had been said, perhaps seeking reassurance that their experiencing was acceptable:

As I'm talking to you I'm thinking it sounds I am really shit at this stuff. (Ella/505-506)

I know that's a terrible thing in counselling to think. (Cath/14)

Both Anna and Beth recalled a time when the impact of the work threatened their sense of professional competency. Beth described feeling shaken when a client left the room shouting and slamming the door; not only distressing as a first encounter with raw anger, but through resonating with childhood experiences of feeling judged:

It seemed to be my fault, so feeling blamed, blaming myself: imagining that anyone else could have managed it a lot better. (Beth/268-270)

Four participants described clients walking out of a session. Ella's first experience of this left her speechless:

He stood up and I was sitting down like a fish going [gulps, gulps]. *I didn't know what to say... and he walked out and then I fretted for a whole week.* (Ella/ 156-167)

Ella reflected upon the impact of a client leaving after a row, echoing Beth's thoughts about responsibility:

As a counsellor [pause] *I don't know. Does it feel like a failure or something if couples have a big row and they get angry and somebody walks out?* (Ella/600-603)

After paralysing countertransference prevented her from using well practiced interventions, Anna doubted her competence:

Feelings of failure... [Becoming] *a critical parent self: 'you should have done this; you should have been able to do this'*. (Anna/278-299)

In contrast to experiences where feelings took time to resolve, some experienced fleeting self doubt accompanying emerging conflict:

I think, 'I'm not going to be able to do this'. (Dana/36-37)

[Thinking:] '*I don't know how I'm going to manage if they start fighting'.* (Ella/318)

Beth worried about premature endings, feeling a responsibility to have created a different outcome:

*If they've gone off in a strop in some way leaving you thinking, 'what else could I have done? Perhaps they are not alright'. That's when you feel bad. (*Beth/279-285)

Cath's strong sense of responsibility to create a good outcome perhaps created internal tension:

You start off with empathy and then slowly you're knocking your head against a wall... they are not available to hear each other or what you are trying to help them understand. (Cath/279-283)

Experience brought doubts about the capacity of some angry couples to use counselling effectively. She described her thoughts moving from hopefulness to disillusionment and times of feeling:

> *A bit of a failure I suppose.* (Cath/44)

Sub-theme: The Conflicted Self

Unresolved conflict created difficulties for three participants, their experiences ranging from feeling unable to intervene to feeling compelled to continue with the work. Anna named her experience as countertransference. The impact was profound, sweeping her into a childhood place to become:

> *This child-self that was feeling helpless and paralysed.* (Anna/269-289*)*

Cath wondered whether past unresolved conflict made endings with conflicted couples difficult:

> *I couldn't let them go... I wanted to solve it; I wanted them to be OK... very similar to my own parental situation.* (Cath/226-234)

Ella suggested unresolved conflicts within her personal couple relationship could be activated by the work and replayed in the personal arena:

> *I will come home and I will pick a fight with my husband about something that will stay. If it's soon after the session it can linger so it can activate something in your own relationship that strikes a chord.* (Ella/638-641)

Sub-theme: The Bodily Self

Physical exhaustion is named by Cath and Dana. For Ella the work can leave her feeling:

> *You have been in a boxing ring yourself.* (Ella/42-44)

As conflict appears, all the participants described physical responses in their current work:

I become very aware of that part of me, which I think is an anxious part. (Ella/311-315)

I can feel it in my stomach and my chest. (Anna/237)

[I feel it] *in my chest and a shaking.* (Dana/46)

Cath described physical contact with the chair as helping to hold herself emotionally:

[I will] s*ometimes hold the chair a bit* [pause], *it would be a case of sitting it out.* (Cath/121-123)

Beth considered the current meaning of her experiencing in terms of a physical assault and contrasts it with past meanings:

It <u>hits</u> me here in the solar plexus... maybe I'm scared, but probably now I am just picking up theirs. Further back I might have been scared myself. (Beth/82-90)

Ella had also experienced a physical impact with a conflicted couple, an impact that mirrored the client experiencing rather than her own:

I couldn't form sentences to come out. And it was as if I got choked... I just described what was happening to me... And the woman said: 'that's the way I feel in my relationship'. (Ella/461-478)

Theme 3

A Responsibility to Manage

Summary: Working with conflict means the counsellor feels heightened responsibility for managing their internal and external self

Participants all described how working with conflict can affect the way they work and the roles they take. The perception of conflict heightened feelings of responsibility:

> *I think we have got a responsibility to respectfulness between our clients and for ourselves in our counselling. So yes I think you step into something more authoritative to do the boundary bit and the rules and what's OK and what's not OK... It's that part of you that is less on the therapeutic side and more on the safety and ethics.* (Ella/133-140)

Sub-theme: The Presence of Anger

The presence of anger brought two different dimensions. It could be useful:

> *It's not pretending... gives you something to work with and to use as an example.* (Ella/58-60)

> [Anger is] *a good thing in the room, something to work with.* (Anna/72)

However anger also brought a dimension of challenge for the counsellor. All participants differentiate between the experience of clients describing anger in the relationship and the experience of being in the presence of live anger between couples. Angry couples can be fighting for their emotional lives:

> *We're at huge risk not because we trust so much in the other person, but that they can destroy us. So whenever we are in a fight in a relationship it can feel like a fight to the death.* (Ella/395-399)

The language described conflict as a strong embodied presence pulling the counsellor to "*take their side*" (Anna/258). It could be "*picked up*" (Beth/75), "grows" (Ella/329),

"*erupting*" (Anna/81), "*going into orbit*" (Ella/331), "*out of control*" (Beth/126), "*hot or cold*" (Beth/72), "*ranting or shouting*" (Beth/331), was possible to "*deconstruct*" (Dana/228) and was frequently stepped back from and externalised:

> *I could take that step back and draw on that training, and do that observer perspective and map things out.* (Anna/55-57)

Three participants described the conflict turning upon the counsellor:

> *The clients might feel angry with each other, but they might also feel angry with the process and feel angry at the counsellor.* (Ella/526-528)

> *I remember feeling all the time held to be responsible that something had been said: this and that. And I knew it was not said like that and it was like I was to blame*. (Chris/337-340)

Subtheme: The Containing Self

All the participants described a responsibility to take a containing role in relation to conflict. Cath described the clients themselves wanting *"containing... and a safe place to argue"* (Cath/352-355). Ella feared words becoming weapons and described a "*responsibility to containment*" (Ella/60-66). She finds herself wanting to convey authority. Through slowing the pace of the interaction and talking more, she is "*trying to sort of get power*" (Ella/357), however her subsequent laugh portrayed that this can feel illusory:

> *There's something about having to maintain some sort of authority because we can't all three be out of control in the room; whereas that would be just terrifying. They need to think that their counsellor has some semblance of control* [laughs]. (Ella/363-374)

Three participants described themselves taking an authoritative role. Dana finds her more authoritative self within a parental role and is surprised by "*the power of the counsellor in the room"* (Dana/20). Ella also saw herself "*stepping into another role"* (Ella/124) where she

describes using power to contain conflict within "*warm authority"* (Ella/91-92). Anna also described an authoritative self taking control:

> *A rational professional self comes up and kind of says, 'right, we are going to stop this and have a look at what's going on'.* (Anna/246-249)

Three participants described how managing conflict required more than conveying authority, but a capacity within the counsellor to manage their own emotions. Anna hypothesised that clients may regulate their emotional expression in response to the capacity of the counsellor to cope with the emotion:

> *There is more anger expressed in the room now than there was when I started... So I wondered if actually people are feeling more held now I can express that.* (Anna/4-7)

Ella observed the client learning from the emotional competence of the counsellor, who teaches by "*modelling or validating emotion*" (Ella/87). Beth used a parental metaphor to describe an emotional holding of both self and client:

> *If you are feeling all uptight and upset and anxious about it all, I imagine that probably comes across. But if you are feeling OK with it they will probably pick up on that, a bit like a mother who does not get into a frightful state when the child's having a tantrum. It helps to calm the whole situation.* (Beth/164-169)

Subtheme: Holding onto Self

Four participants described a responsibility to protect self in order to work effectively. They described a conscious awareness of needing to retain their own frame of reference and to "*hang onto who you are*" (Cath/245). Cath observed that "*you have to hang onto your sanity with some angry couples*" (Cath/239-241), warning of the power of clients to distort the boundaries of self through "*trying to hang onto me in some way, to get some kind of boundary*" (Cath/140-143).

For Anna, a risk perhaps came from losing her sense of self through the vulnerable aspects of her own child self becoming overwhelmed:

> *There is this child-self that is my feeling self and I also need to take care of that... I actually say to my child-self, 'it's OK, never mind, it's fine, um, we will talk about this later'.* (Anna/106-114)

Beth described how retaining a clear sense of self is linked to both emotional management and clear boundaries:

> *Understanding your own emotions and keeping that boundary; that is theirs and this is me. I don't have to take on all of this; I can observe it over there. So perhaps it is that: to observe more than to absorb.* (Beth/172-175)

Theme 4

Managing the Impact

Summary: Couple work means the impact upon self of the counsellor needs to be managed

All participants described how managing the impact of the work can be difficult:

> *Even the supervision, where people are trying to help you feel a bit better about it, the feelings are still there, they are very personal.* (Beth/55-58)

Subtheme: Supervision

All the participants identified supervision as an essential support. Four observed that they used it more effectively when experienced, for with experience "*the more honest you get about what your fears are"* (Ella/577-578). For Ella it was helpful to have immediate access to supervision after difficult sessions, speculating whether as a new counsellor it felt like failure to request this:

> *You think you have to get it right and it's a failure or something to have supervision in-between.* (Ella/579-585)

Anna, Beth and Ella described being inhibited from using supervision effectively as novice counsellors, when it felt more about "*accountability and more sort of managerial*" (Anna/418-419). Beth described a fear of judgement:

> *The supervisor then in my mind held a different role in my mind, about whether I got it right or wrong.* (Beth/292-293)

Supervision was specifically mentioned as giving theoretical knowledge by Anna and Ella, as bringing insight by Anna, Cath, Dana and Ella and as emotionally supportive by all. Ella described a supervisor normalising difficult experiences with encouraging messages such as:

> *It's going to happen and it will happen to everybody.* (Ella/612-613)

For Cath, supervision also supported long term work with stuck angry couples. She felt this was not always helpful for the clients or the counsellor:

> *It would have been helpful to know that you could finish seeing them... we were very much encouraged that long term work was what worked.* (Cath/439-432)

> *I don't think anyone said you would be better off not working* [with them]. *It can be exhausting* (Cath/662-666).

Subtheme: Maintaining a Sense of Self

All the participants identified needing strategies additional to supervision to manage the emotional load and the impact upon their personal self. Cath recognised that as she began to feel increasingly disillusioned with couple work she chose to work with individuals rather than couples. Conscious that there was a limit to her capacity for couple work, she explained:

> *It was a question of how much... you could bear.* (Cath/32-39)

Support from others outside supervision was important:

> *Those immediate bits where just that another human being knows that you have had a difficult session or that another counsellor goes, 'I heard shouting coming from your room'. (Ella/545-548)*

> *Over the years (because I had such little self-confidence) colleagues have built this up. (Beth/343-345)*

> *When I talked about* [working with couples again] *she said, 'don't you remember how you used to be like after you had seen some of those couples? You used to phone me'.* (Cath/640-643)

Space for reflection, process notes and journal writing were strategies used by Anna, Dana and Ella to separate from the work:

> *I need a come-down time to digest what people have said and how it's gone. Not in a counselling sense, but more in a gut response kind of way.* (Dana/273-277)

> *Writing up the notes (the process notes) is really helpful to get it out [when] left holding anger... so I wasn't carrying it.* (Ella/505-517)

Anna and Ella found transitional space between work and home helped emotional containment and processing:

> *Travel is actually really helpful. It's a sort of transition... a regular self-affirmation time.* (Anna/122-126)

Personal therapy was mentioned by three participants: to process unresolved conflict and as support when personal problems added to work stress. Therapy helped Cath continue working at a difficult personal time:

> *While I was surviving the anger and all the things going on in the* [counselling] *room, I had all this in my house too.* (Cath/303-304)

Theme 5

The Developed Self

Summary: Working with couple conflict could develop both professional and personal confidence in managing angry feelings

Four participants described personal or professional growth in either their capacity to manage this aspect of the work or in their own relationship with anger.

Subtheme: Developing Confidence

For Dana, confidence in the work seemed to come quickly, building both professional and personal confidence and a strengthened sense of self. The understanding gained in the work led to growing self-acceptance and confidence in relationships:

> [Working with couple conflict] *has always been alright, which has been a lot of benefit to me in building my confidence and self-esteem.* (Dana/37-40)

> *I look back at negative experiences in relationships and I don't think they were so much my fault.* (Dana/249-250)

Anna, Ella, Dana and Beth described how becoming less uncomfortable and more confident when working with anger was an experience driven process:

> *The change probably came from being familiar with it and working with it*. (Ella/701-707)

Experience brought greater emotional and theoretical understanding with a calmer acceptance, however some discomfort remained:

> *I don't think comfortable is the right word. I think I'm more OK with it and I can keep my professional self going.* (Ella/4-6)

Beth's confidence in working with conflict enabled her to accept difficult cases that colleagues found unmanageable, but she is not complacent about the inherent difficulties:

> *I am much more accepting... I think the impact is still there but you can manage it much better.* (Beth/5-11)

Training was valued in giving theoretical knowledge, but not for coping with the emotional impact or understanding self. Ella was unique in finding her training helpful in discovering her own relationship with anger:

> *What training taught me was I did not do anger. I was lovely; I was a peacekeeper.* (Ella/669-671)

Anna questioned whether training could be expected to equip a counsellor for the emotional impact:

> [Training] *gave the tools for being able to get objective views of things but not in terms of being prepared for the sort of emotional impact... how can training prepare you for that?* (Anna/373-378)

Although doubting the capacity of training to prepare her, Anna questioned why she was not warned that the work would confront her with her demons:

> *It forces you to in a way that I think you don't realise when you are going into it.* (Anna/105-106)

She expressed surprise that working with conflict seemed unacknowledged within training, when:

> *The relationship to conflict is so central in terms of them and everything we do in terms of relationship.* (Anna/394-396)

Sub-theme: A Changed Relationship with Anger

Three participants described their own relationship with anger as having changed as a result of working with couple conflict. Anna described becoming more open to her emotional experiencing:

> C*onflict is one of the major issues I have had to face... getting in touch with my own feelings of anger. That had a major impact.* (Anna/167-175)

Anna, Dana and Ella were clear that working with couple conflict had impacted the personal self. Ella identified significant changes in interpersonal relating:

> *I am better at owning it now. More likely to do the getting angry bit and less likely to do the sulky stroppy bit... I've changed the way I do it with my husband, my family or friends.* (Ella/689-695)

Dana described how working with conflict helped her become more confident, less afraid of anger, less likely to assume others were angry with her and less afraid of men. Friendships have been helped through:

> *Identifying* [anger] *in a more constructive way, rather than just an instinctive fearing sort of way.* (Dana/207-208)

> *I have a close friend... I used to be a bit afraid of him... But having worked with couples, it's like with him... it's like his fear or his anxiety or something; it's not anger. It has helped with that relationship.* (Dana/226-224)

Anna described how working with angry couples had helped her to recognise and express her relationship needs to her family and her partner:

> *That's changed me in my own relationships and particularly with my current partner... I know I've changed. I've been able to get angry myself, to allow myself to feel anger and I have learnt to use that. I've learnt about the value of anger in terms of identifying something that's wrong, you know, identifying boundaries that might have to be set.* (Anna/143-156)

It would seem that a decision to train as a couple counsellor can have far reaching effects, not only upon the counsellor, but upon those they share their lives with.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Discussion

Five main themes emerged in this study, which recorded the voice of the counsellor working with couple conflict. I will ground these themes within the relevant previously reviewed literature.

This study highlights the complexity of the work and that what "we have to offer is not a technique, not a theory, but who we are" (Kramer, 2000, p.xviii). Wosket (1999) describes the professional self drawing upon other aspects of self to manage the work and my findings clearly illustrate the breadth of both professional and personal challenge in the work.

Childhood Experiences

Rønnestad and Skovholt (2001) warn that the work can reopen wounds from early life experiences. In my study, all identified family-of-origin experiences as implicated in difficulties working with conflict, concurring with Siegel (1999) that past experience affects perceptions and reactions to working with conflict. My study reminds us that children are affected by overt and covert anger (Gosselin, 2002) and that family conflict styles influence the adult relationship with anger (Whitton et al., 2008; Pockock, 2010). My participants from anger avoidant families experienced distress, not only because of the meaning they attached to anger, but from lacking coping strategies when encountering anger. First encounters shocked: *"It is quite scary when you are not used to it. Even if you are used to it, it could be pretty scary. It depends on what circumstances you'd been made to be used to"* (Beth/369-372).

Sharkin and Gelso (1993) examined the impact of anger upon counselling skills, and although my study looked at inner experiencing, both studies showed that discomfort with anger can affect the counsellor. For my participants, discomfort was connected to meaning. The meanings attached to anger varied from personal failure or destroyed relationships, to being a responsibility to resolve (identified by Amato and Afifi in 2006 as common in children feeling caught in-between conflict). Gender was involved in some anger beliefs. For Dana, male anger was singularly threatening (as found by Seidel et al. in 2010). Anna feared female anger would lead the woman to be rejected, a prevalent female belief identified by Cox et al. (2004).

My findings emphasise the importance of the therapist understanding their own relationship with anger. Self-reflexivity, particularly about socio-cultural identity (Mills-Powell & Worthington, 2007) and family-of-origin experiences (Bowen, 1994) seemed particularly important in helping participants resolve difficult feelings. The review showed that therapists often find anger difficult (Bandura, 1956) and that therapist attachment triggers and responses can escalate couple conflict. The review also highlighted that the perceptual processing of conflict is distorted by attachment styles (Wood et al., 2012; Mikulincer et al., 2002; Silva et al., 2012; Wittenborn, 2012; Suslow et al., 2010) and that unresolved family-of-origin issues can create therapist impairment (Jordon & Quinn, 1996). My findings describing participants' anger beliefs suggest that counsellors would benefit from understanding what anger means to them within an attachment context.

Mason, Gibney and Crago (2002) describe family-of-origin understanding as central to effective ethical work. Ella recognised the disabling impact of her family-of-origin script

within training, but other participants felt their training had not helped them understand their own relationship with conflict. Cath suggested her training had helped her understand her parents' conflict, but not prepared her for working with angry couples. Anna and Dana recommended that an experiential training component focusing upon understanding their own relationship to anger would have been helpful. As experienced counsellors, my participants' couple training will not reflect the content of recent courses. I hope these now include elements related to the counsellor's own relationship to conflict.

The Disrupted Self

The difficult and confusing experiences described by my participants triangulate with clinical supervisors' descriptions of supervising couple work. Siegel (1999), Storm (2007) and Livingston (1998) describe counsellors becoming overwhelmed and confused. All my participants experienced emotionally demanding and alarming experiences threatening their emotional boundary, as described by Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003). They seemed most profoundly disturbed when experiencing incongruence between their idealised professional self and their personal self, an observation consistent with Wallerstein's (1990) statement that the work can leave counsellors feeling professionally and personally threatened.

My findings demonstrate that for those who are affected, the impact of the work can range from uncomfortable to painful. Anxiety was a common thread, described as inevitable by Hill (2009). My participants often described anger as a threat (Baas et al., 2008; Warnecke, 2012; de Jong et al., 2010; Fox et al., 2000), the type of threat depending partly upon anger related beliefs. Given McCarthy's (2004) observations that couple conflict increased therapist anxiety in novice therapists, first experiences with couple conflict would be expected to be

difficult and for Beth and Ella these were. My study found that all participants apart from Beth described some continuing anxiety, although most described anxiety diminishing with experience and all had become confident that their skills in working with couple conflict were competent. Normalising anxiety evoked through working with conflict was described as a useful supervisor intervention. Perhaps reassurance from this research, that with time the impact will diminish (but may not disappear) could also be useful.

My finding that counsellors could experience both transitory and more profound self doubt, accords with the review findings that self-doubt is normal (Thériault & Gazzola, 2005; Thériault et al., 2009). Evaluating self-adequacy is tied to evaluating potential difficulty (Goh et al., 2010) and so my participants described how past experience of professional coping reassures momentary doubt and fear. Dana finds strength through internal dialogue about her role (as described by Rober, 1999), telling herself, *"this is my role, I'm not locked into this argument"* (Dana/90).

When considering the impact of negative valence, my findings showed that in new situations (such as encountering intense anger or countertransference), inexperience could create helplessness, confusion and internal focus. Perhaps when heightened stress increases anxiety (Goh et al., 2010), the common effects of observed anger are more apparent, with heightened self-observation (Horowitz, 2002), narrowed awareness and reduced creative cognitive reflection capacity (Miron-Spektor, 2009). My participants were aware of needing to manage their anxiety to manage couple conflict (Hinchcliffe, 1991), describing self-soothing behaviours (Wood et al., 2012) that helped them hold onto a clear sense of self despite tension.

Self-doubt may recur many times in a career (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003) and reveals a healthy willingness to self-reflect (Bischoff & Barton, 2002). In my participants it was often prompted by premature endings. They cared deeply about helping their couples, difficult cases prompting self questioning: "*What else could I have done? Perhaps they are not alright? That's when you feel bad* "(Beth/283-285). I wondered however, how easy discussion about self-doubt may be, as Cath and Ella pondered on what counsellor reactions or client actions might be viewed as professional failure. Clinicians castigate counsellors as incompetent if conflict ever escalates (Doherty, 2014; Weeks et al., 2005), so what unvoiced expectations about counsellor responsibility covertly influence our profession and dark moments of self-doubt? It could be helpful to expose these.

Duffell (2004) warns that unresolved issues encourage inappropriate responsibility within couple work. My findings illustrate how unresolved conflicts can fuel intense, complex experiences, often accompanied by strong feelings of responsibility; it seems reasonable to suggest that these experiences are related to psychodynamic unconscious processes. Working with couples can intensify countertransference (Alexander & Van der Heide, 1997; Kaslow, 2001) and anxiety may indicate its presence, but managing anxiety can mitigate its effects (Gelso & Hayes, 2007). Even experienced and confident counsellors may find themselves suddenly caught in a countertransference spell, as Anna discovered when swept into a child's position of helplessness watching warring adults. Leveton (2005) describes this scenario as a risk for all counsellors working with angry couples. Ella seemed aware of the presence of both conscious and unconscious elements when client arguments triggered arguments in her own relationship; a finding that parallels that of Flynn-Piercy (2002).

An exaggerated physical impact was regularly felt by all my participants. These findings echo those in Artingstall's 2006 study. Therapist sensitivity to bodily sensation is important for a therapist (Wallin, 2007; Warnecke, 2012) and somatic experiencing often signalled to my participants that anger was emerging. Ella described her body becoming an *"anger radar*" (Ella/294) warning of emerging anger: "*a live emotion and a physical one, and you can feel it in your body and you can feel it in the room*" (Ella/74-76). Ella identifies her reactions as born from anxiety and Dana's shaking or Cath gripping her chair can also be credibly interpreted as anxious responses. Beth described the sensation she feels in terms of assault. She is uncertain of the ownership of the emotion, as was Ella at first when feeling choked. Perhaps these are examples of the action of mirror neurons translating the experiences of others into our own somatic experiencing (Rothschild, 2004). Whatever the mechanism, the findings can draw from Shaw's (2003) description of a therapist empathising bodily in response to a client. Venart, Vassos and Pitcher-Heft (2007) highlight the importance of these physical cues in offering information about the needs of the alliance, the client and the counsellor.

My participants described exhaustion after a session with a conflicted couple. I move onto considering next what the counsellor is attempting to manage within a session and this perhaps demonstrates why it is not surprising that this work can take a physical toll.

A Responsibility to Manage

All my participants talked about responsibility: a responsibility to manage the presence of conflict safely, a responsibility to manage self in the interests of the client, a responsibility towards self and a responsibility to help clients take responsibility. While I suggest that acting responsibly is embedded within the profession and underlies ethical frameworks, it seemed the counsellor's sense of responsibility heightened when working with angry couples.

The words used to identify anger pictured it as a destructive, unpredictable, escalating explosive force. These resemble common anger metaphors (Wilkowski et al., 2009), and the descriptions of couple conflict by Morrissette (2007), Gottman (1994) and Retzinger (1991). Clients were seen as emotionally flooded (Griffin & Tyrell, 2003), convinced of the wrongness of the other (Gomez, 1997) and needing containment (Doherty, 2014). However my participants also concurred with Roffman (2004) that anger was more than a 'thing' to be managed, but was a doorway: to underlying feelings, to *"finding the person's vulnerability"* (Dana/239), to creating understanding and to facilitating change (Johnson, 2009; Donovan, 2009).

A common theme for my participants was a sense of adopting a containing role with conflict, which Weeks et al. (2005), Johnson (2004), Scheinkman (2008) and Hinchcliffe (1991) all describe as necessary. The use of therapeutic power may be dynamic and relational (Proctor, 2002) or oppressive (Masson, 1989), so ongoing reflexivity about its use is essential (Bager-Charleson, 2010). Authority was consciously held by my participants, within a context of responsibility and perhaps on the edge of the domain of production (Lang et al., 1990). This

was similar to the change identified in Artingstall's (2006) research on DVA disclosures, in which counsellors felt heightened responsibility and that they sensed themselves becoming more powerful and directive. Artingstall (2006) found relevance in the model of Lang et al. (1990), in which professionals move between different domains depending upon the emerging information. In moving into the domain of production, responsibilities such as safety become prioritised. This conceptualisation also seems relevant for working with couple conflict without a DVA disclosure.

Ella described how she had initially struggled with the concept of power, but framed her use of self within a concept of warm authority to manage emotions threatening to overpower. Dana also came to couple work with concerns about power, particularly about gender-based power imbalances affecting communication (LaFrance, 1992). Having previously felt "*disregarded as silly*" (Dana/116) by men and believing gender inequality meant men would resist directive female interventions (Werner-Wilson et al., 1997), Dana was relieved to discover she had sufficient authority to contain emerging conflict in heterosexual couples.

The detection of anger disrupted automatic, well practiced skills, to create reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987) about how to intervene. The participants' choice of interventions with anger, directly reflected their training modalities (Donovan, 1999); however a common thread was directing clients to: *"connect with their adult selves and to be able to take that perspective on what's happening between them*" (Anna/261-262). Facilitating cognitive connection to anger in this way can create emotional change (Roberts & Koval, 2003; Weeks et al., 2005), however containment was also managed through deliberately slowing the

pace, by becoming "*slow and reassuring and calm"* (Ella/379), echoing Johnson's (2005) description of effective micro-skills.

In becoming a containing self influencing the emotional temperature in the room to create a secure therapeutic base (Clulow, 2010), the participants described needing to contain their own anxiety to calm the situation. Wallin (2007) suggests the influence is below consciousness and for my participants there was a heightened sense of needing to communicate on every level that they could contain what the client fears. Words were chosen "*deliberately, more deliberately... trying to give the impression that this is O.K"* (Ella/370-373). Artingstall (2006) also found that language was used more deliberately.

Although the study excluded experiences where the counsellor was aware at the time of DVA, several parallels were found with Artingstall's (2006) study. This suggests some similar processes may be operating. The differences between working with couple conflict with and without DVA, were explored briefly in the final interviews, but this did not lead to any themes in the analysis.

The final element of responsibility was holding onto a sense of self when a situation threatened to pull the self into a professionally unhelpful position. These findings accord with Clark's (2009) description of the couple therapist needing defined boundaries and a clear sense of self. The participants corroborate Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison's (2011) description of how avoiding porous boundaries requires a high level of self-monitoring, in addition to the ingredients identified by Gelso and Hayes (2007) to counter countertransference. Ella described avoiding being sucked into the client blame frame where

"*they will pull you about"* (Ella/89), while Dana described calming herself by "*taking a deep breath and stepping back*" (Dana/64). Anna's description of self-soothing as conflict emerges, juxtaposes with conscious reflection about how to manage the session, perhaps demonstrating how the counsellor constantly moves between awareness of self and other (Ellis, Krengel & Back, 2002). My participants demonstrated an understanding of the need for attention to the boundaries of self and of processing the experience from different positions, which Clark (2009) found to be an important factor in creating resilience.

Managing the Impact

Supervision was used by my study participants in building skill development, understanding and confidence (Bischoff et al., 2002) and for support in managing the emotional impact of the work (Hill, 2009; Siegel, 1999). O'Donovan, Halford and Walters (2011) identified tension between the normative and other functions of supervision, and this was apparent in my findings.

My participants found that as they became more experienced they were able to use supervision more effectively, seeing it as a valuable resource and losing anxieties about supervisory judgement. However as new counsellors, when they probably most needed support, supervision itself could bring additional anxiety. It took time to believe in the secure supervision base described by Hill (2009).

Experiencing negative emotions is an integral part of the work of the counsellor and is not an indicator of incompetence (Rober, 2011), yet Thériault et al. (2009) found that feelings of incompetence can be difficult to discuss. As new therapists, neither Ella nor Beth felt able to

make immediate contact with supervisors when distressed. Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, (2011) highlight how anxiety is increased when novices are uncertain about professional measures of competence, while anxiety will itself make seeking support harder (Mehr et al., 2010). Novice anxiety about being seen as inadequate was pervasive even when the supervisory relationship was good. Beth remembered "*waiting to get criticised (which didn't actually happen, but that was my fear*)" (Beth/294-298). Cath saw supervisory support as essential, but wondered whether supervisors sufficiently consider the potential impact of the work upon the counsellor.

Although Shallcross (2013) suggests that counsellors can struggle with self-care to cope with any personal aftermath from the work, my findings suggest that all the study participants were self-aware and used a variety of strategies to actively manage any effects upon their personal self. Venart et al. (2007) identified helpful practices (such as journaling, grounding, and seeking personal and professional support from others) which were used by the study participants. Travel helped Anna process her work and keep boundaries between work and home. Personal therapy was used by most of the participants if the work highlighted unresolved issues, or if difficult personal problems compounded the total stress being carried.

The Developed Self

The literature review considered studies indicating that working with couples could lead to personal and professional growth. These were not specifically looking at the impact of working with conflict, but my findings found similar themes. My findings therefore offer a perspective upon experiences that may influence that growth

All my participants described personal or professional development, which they attributed to a number of factors: working with conflict, therapy and maturity. Anna, Ella and Dana are clear the work itself has affected them, while Chris and Beth described the other elements as more significant. Maturing is influential in therapist development (Skovholt & Trotter Mathison, 2011) and age is linked to increasing acceptance of anger and lower anxiety (Shallcross et al., 2013). Change therefore would be expected to occur with time.

Skovholt and Ronnestad's model (1992) describes experience as key to developing confidence and my participants cited experience as the main driver in developing this with angry couples. Only Dana felt she had gained any specific skills through training, which reveals a gap within historic training courses about managing conflict. My participants' training had not generally included specific content about working with anger, however Hess, Knox and Hill (2006) found that this could reduce anxiety and increase self-efficacy in therapists. It is interesting that EFCT training routinely includes specific skills training in "catching the bullet" [of anger] (Johnson, 2004, p. 152).

Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) describe a developmental model in which therapists gain self-assurance with experience. As counselling experience begins to increase confidence, general anxiety diminishes and so managing anxiety about couple conflict may become easier to achieve. Managing couple conflict crucially requires managing therapist anxiety (Hinchcliffe, 1991). Beth described how when anxiety is managed, the counsellor can be emotionally present and offer empathic validation of feelings: "*once you can listen and hear what they are on about and put it into their own words and things, then the anger goes"* (Beth/248-252).

Protinsky and Coward's (2001) research demonstrates that integration of the professional and personal selves creates a foundation for resilience in MFT therapists. My study suggests that all my participants were committed to developing this throughout their careers, using reflexivity, supervision and sometimes therapy. Anna illustrates the reflexive cycle of growth identified by Paris et al. (2006): through confronting personal issues with anger, personal growth fuelled clinical growth. She believed that in becoming more open to her own emotional experiencing this had led to clients feeling safer and expressing more emotions: "*it's what I've been faced with in my work with the couples I see; highlighting the issues I want to look at and having done that, of course I brought that back into my practice"* (Anna/176-178).

For Dana, a greater understanding of anger and increased confidence with client anger, reduced self-blame about her relationships and enhanced self-acceptance. It also developed understanding and decreased anxiety generally in personal relationships, a finding congruent with Montagno et al.'s (2011) description of couple therapy training leading to positive outcomes in personal relationships and increased attachment security. Anna and Ella described changes which have also been identified in studies of the general impact of the work. They described taking greater personal responsibility in relationship interaction and becoming more emotionally open (Rhodes, 2011; Flynn-Piercy, 2002), being clearer about personal needs and relational boundaries (Paris et al., 2006; Logue, 2002).

Although Siegel (1999) warns that working with couple conflict can engender pessimism about personal relationships, all my participants described themselves as becoming increasingly effective in relationships. Maybe for some, it is not just working with couples,

but working with couple conflict that can fuel changes in personal relating. Maybe losing some fear of anger enables needs to be expressed and boundaries to be renegotiated.

Concluding Comments

This study bridges a significant gap in the literature by adding the counsellor perspective. The existing literature suggests that working with couple conflict requires particular skills, that significant numbers of counsellors find difficulty working with angry client feelings and that this can affect the personal and professional self of the counsellor. Weight is added to my findings by triangulating them within the literature about the influences upon personal anger styles, counsellor reactions to anger, supervision, counsellor development, and studies of couple counsellors and MFT training. My interest in attachment theory has brought an additional dimension to my literature search, but is unlikely to have influenced my subsequent analysis as this was not a factor in the study findings.

Although this study cannot comment on how many counsellors this could affect, it does help fill a gap in the literature about what it can mean to those who may be affected, as well as describing the everyday experience of managing complex processes when working with couple conflict.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

Implications for Practice

This study shows that working with couple conflict can feel painful and disabling. It links negative valence with childhood experiences, anger beliefs, unresolved conflict and the impact of gender.

These findings highlight the need for couple counsellors to understand their own relationship with conflict and to have begun this work before their first encounters with couple conflict. Exploring this within training, experiential groups and supervision was suggested as potentially helpful, however the findings also demonstrated that even experienced counsellors may still be affected by the power of countertransference.

Anxiety was a prominent feature when first working with couple conflict, but experience later moderated anxious feelings. As inexperienced counsellors, anxiety about being judged incompetent could affect support seeking. My participants were clear that it was experience that brought skill and confidence, however even experienced counsellors could question what signified professional failure.

The literature review suggested that counsellors could be helped by understanding their own attachment style (Hill, 2009) and that specific training interventions could reduce anxiety (Hess et al., 2006). Clarifying implicit professional norms, normalising anxiety and exploring reactions to conflict within supervision, helped my participants manage their responses to working with conflict.

Experience, supervisory support and theoretical understanding led to confidence in working with conflict. A physical response was felt by all counsellors and while uncomfortable, this could be useful. Key elements were identified: containing emotions safely, holding clear boundaries of self and managing the impact upon the counsellor. The findings emphasise that the counsellor uses their personal and professional self in a specific way that can be emotionally draining and physically exhausting.

It is important that managers and supervisors, as well as the counsellors themselves, acknowledge the complexity of this work and the toll it can take. New counsellors should ideally be shielded not just from DVA, but also from high conflict cases until they have a sufficient base of skills and self-understanding. Hearing the participants' powerful and poignant descriptions suggests there is surely an ethical responsibility to ensure counsellors are specifically prepared for this. Counsellors need to not only develop their counselling muscles, but to be aware of how to protect their vulnerable parts and be well armoured before being sent into the conflict zone.

Integration between the professional and personal self was ongoing, and for some, working with couple conflict was identified as a trigger for changes in their intimate relationships. The literature has demonstrated that this is a common process. This would suggest that counsellors have a responsibility to regularly self-reflect upon how the therapeutic conversations are impacting not just themselves, but also upon their intimate relationships.

Limitations of the Research

The major limitation of this study is the difficulty of doing justice within the scope of a Masters study to the richness and complexity of the participants' reflections on their personal experiences. In addition, the broad aim of the study, to explore without preconceptions, has perhaps illuminated an extensive rather than a detailed landscape and revealed avenues that the constraints of the study prevented from being fully explored.

Although a research supervisor offered guidance, a further limitation derived from researcher inexperience. Concern about not over-stepping the researcher role into that of counsellor conceivably inhibited the exploration of some areas in greater depth in the interviews.

This study did not consider differences in terms of age, gender or ethnicity, all of which could potentially affect the counsellor's relationship with anger. It also did not distinguish between assertive anger and hot or cold rage (Parker Hall, 2009), or compare experiencing with when anger was not present. Further studies would need to address these points.

This study echoes the limitations of all small scale qualitative studies. With a homogenous group and a small participant sample size, there can be no claims that this is a representative sample. The findings cannot attempt to provide general truths or identify universal causes and effects, but hopefully they do describe a microcosm of the counselling world. Further research would help add weight to what has been found.

Recommendations for Future Research

As the study progressed, possible directions for future research emerged, including:

- A longitudinal study of anxiety about working with couple conflict.
- A study of the effect of counsellor attachment style upon working with couple conflict.
- A study of couple counsellors' perception of failure.
- A study of the impact of specific training in working with angry couples.

Concluding Comments

> *I certainly really didn't realise, and how can you really realise, how complex and how rich the experience actually is.* (Anna/379-381)

Anna is describing the generality of couple counselling work. The work truly is complex and rich. It is important to acknowledge that while this study has explored an aspect that can cause counsellor difficulty, this is only one part of the whole picture with couples work. Neither too must we lose sight of the couples themselves; we must not forget that in the midst of the arguing are usually two fearful, vulnerable souls. It would also be trite to suggest that counselling angry couples is just about managing anger, but it does involve managing the therapeutic process with a particular focus, so that clients are emotionally held within the therapeutic relationship.

'Rich and complex' is also a good description of this research process. Some of my participants told me that the interviews helped them find new understanding. For myself, I have been helped by each of them to construct new meanings, and the process has helped me understand more fully, that "only engaging in what is other to ourselves is it possible to open up new ways of thinking" (Frie, 2003, p.8). A1 describes how the research helped me develop both professionally and personally, and considers where these directions may lead to.

In total, my participants reflected upon fifty eight years of experience of working with couples. I hope their voices will be heard. They bring valuable clarity about the self of the counsellor working with couple conflict, offer perspectives that can support new counsellors, and vividly illustrate the value of a reflexive stance in developing professional practice.

I feel greatly indebted to my participants, for their courage in sharing experiences that may be a core part of their professional identity. I hope counsellors, supervisors, managers and trainers will listen to these wise, self-aware, experienced counsellors and never become complacent about the complex and challenging processes counsellors work with everyday.

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Appendix 1

Reflexive Statement

At the start of this process I heard the tutor warning it would be consuming and full of challenges to overcome. I had little conception of how big a practical task lay ahead, or how emotionally involving the study would be. Undertaking this research has been a significant life event and I have been very privileged to have had this opportunity to learn from my five participants.

The principal findings resonate with my own experience, which is reassuring in that it offers further triangulation, but also frustrating in leaving me wondering whether the findings simply state the obvious. A conversation with counsellors who do not work with couples helped me feel differently, when they questioned whether a competent counsellor would 'allow' couples to become angry. I was astounded by the lack of understanding of the complexity of couples work. In stark contrast, the American Couples Institute is currently marketing their training with:

> I'm a professional. I'm an expert, but I dread when that fighting couple comes in: *7* out of 10 couples therapists feel this way. You know the feeling of apprehension, helplessness and inadequacy when you sit in front of a couple that's replaying the War of the Roses. (http://www.couplesinstitutetraining.com/developmentalmodel).

Like my participants, experience has helped me feel competent when working with angry couples, but I know that this can drain my energy. I now feel reassured that I am not alone with this. I am more aware of needing to look after myself in the emotional cauldron of couple work, and will be less dispirited when I find it tiring. While the participants' experiences were all very different, the common themes have helped normalise and understand my own experiences, while helping me more consciously attend to the various processes that need considering when working therapeutically with an angry couple.

The literature review has reinforced for me the importance of attachment theory within relational work and drawn me to EFCT. I hope that I can now develop my use of EFCT within my practice. EFCT is an attachment based systemic and experiential model. It seeks to reprocess emotional experience and create stronger attachment connections through creating different dialogues (Tilley & Palmer, 2013). I was in the first cohort of counsellors trained to use EFCT in England and it has given me practical skills that help de-escalate an angry couple and to deepen their emotions more safely. I find it a powerful and effective model that gives me a therapeutic structure to hold onto when on unsafe ground with angry couples.

The research process has brought me to a better understanding of my own relationship with anger and enabled a more mindful observation of my own responses to the anger of others. Better aware of my typical defensive responses, I feel I am more conscious of when my attachment system is being triggered and more able to differentiate between that and sensing the client experiencing. That can only be helpful in my work.

Counselling interventions were not a focus of the study, but they have been in my thoughts and at times it has been frustrating to be missing this crucial dimension. My interest is now expanding from 'what does it mean to the counsellor when we do this' to; 'how do we do this in the most effective way for clients'. I am now considering building on this study and using it as the basis for a training workshop focused upon working with angry couples. I hope that the end of this writing may herald the beginning of something new.

Appendix 2

The Literature Search

The search principally utilised electronic databases. Key words were chosen and associated terms found. Using Boolean operators, truncation and wildcards I searched the databases of PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioural sciences collection, Soc INDEX, Cinahl plus, Science Direct, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library and SAGE journals. The basic search strategy formulas were:

- (counsel?or* or therap*) and (anger or conflict* or argument*) and ("couple* therap*" or " couple* counsel?ing" or "relationship counsel?ing" or "marriage counsel?ing" or MFT)
- ("couple* therap*" or " couple* counsel?ing" or "relationship counsel?ing" or "marriage counsel?ing" or MFT) and (countertransference or anxiety or anger or structure or stress or supervision or attachment)
- (Counsel?or* or therap*) and (countertransference or anxiety or anger or structure or stress or supervision or attachment)

Additional searches were made using Google Scholar. Article references generated further data and additional material was accessed from the University of Chester, university repositories, inter-library loans, the BACP research collection and material already in my possession. A search was made of the internal Relate website and permission has been given to reference two MA dissertation studies published there.

This dissertation has drawn from eleven studies of couple counsellors. Most of these studies were North American and involved mainly novice doctoral level marriage and family therapists. A disproportionate number relate to the EFCT model; this probably reflects their current research output compared to other models. A significant amount of associated and contextual research information emerged, which has contributed to the nine themes outlined in the literature review.

Appendix 3

Different Paradigm Choices Influence the Research Design

Adapted from:

- Bunniss, & Kelly, (2010)
- Ponterotto (2005)
- McGregor & Murnane (2010)
- Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009)

Paradigm tradition	**Quantitative** ⟷ **Qualitative** →			
Paradigm	**Positivism**	**Post positivism**	**Constructivist/interpretative**	**Critical/Ideological**
Seeks:	To verify theory about causality, laws and relations	To refute theory about causality, laws and relations and establish probable truth	Theory and patterns	Reflection, emancipation and problem solving
Possible research question for different methodologies	How frequently are counsellors are affected by working with couple conflict?	What factors cause counsellors to be affected?	Phenomenology: What are the main experiential features of being affected? IPA: How do affected counsellors make sense of being affected? Grounded theory: What factors influence how people manage when they feel affected?	Foucauldian discourse analysis: How does the power structure of supervisor and supervisee inhibit counsellors who have been affected by working with couple conflict from seeking support? Action research: How will specific training in working with conflict affect how counsellors feel about working with couple conflict?
Ontology	Naive realism Reality is static and fixed The world is ordered according to an overarching objective truth	Critical realism Reality is static and fixed The world is ordered according to an overarching objective truth, however the world can never be fully known	Relativism Reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than it being an external singular entity.	Radical constructionism Reality may be objective but truth is continually contested by competing groups
Epistemology	Objective, generalisable theory can be developed to accurately describe the world Knowledge can be neutral or value-free	Objective knowledge of the world is not necessarily fully accessible Seeks to establish 'probable' truth	Knowledge is subjective There are multiple, diverse interpretations of reality There is no one ultimate or 'correct' way of knowing	Knowledge is co-constructed between individuals and groups Knowledge is mediated by power relations and therefore continuously under revision
Typical methods	Statistical testing of hypotheses (e.g. randomised controlled trials, questionnaires)	Systematically gathered and analysed data from representative samples (e.g. surveys, interviews, focus groups)	Tends to use qualitative methods to capture various interpretations of a phenomenon (e.g. naturalistic observation, interviews, use of narrative	May use both quantitative and qualitative methods, usually in a participatory way Often uses iterative research design (e.g. case studies, focus groups, participant observation)

Appendix 4

Initial Assumptions: The Impact on Counsellors of Working with Couple Conflict

Training, supervision and experience should equip counsellors to work with angry couples

Different models will use different skills when working with angry couples – not all training may address this. EFCT does.

POWER- of client and counsellor- loss of power or difficulty using it

Counsellors need to feel comfortable working with angry couples or this will disturb their emotional self

Counsellors need to feel comfortable working with angry couples or this will threaten their sense of professional self

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IS CENTRAL

New counsellors are likely to find working with angry couples particularly stressful.

Experienced counsellors can cope

Counsellors feel a sense of failure if conflict escalates beyond the level they are comfortable with

The counsellor's own relationship with anger will influence their reaction to couple conflict and their perception of the level of conflict. The counsellor needs self-awareness of this.

The counsellor's resilience at any moment in time will impact their ability to work with conflicted couples

Counsellor **SELF**

It is hard and difficult and challenging work!

Counsellors are responsible for:

- Client safety
- Making effective interventions
- Managing themselves

Working with angry couples is a common feature of the work

The self of the counsellor may change

Counter transference is more likely with couple conflict

The meaning of anger for client and counsellor will vary with context – especially gender

The wounded healer – what draws people to couples work?

Counsellors can feel overwhelmed by couple conflict

COUPLE CONFLICT

Angry couples can behave in ways that are disrespectful to each other and the counsellor.

There is always a risk that there is undisclosed violence or abuse

Emotions can hijack cognitive functions

Perceiving anger in others leads to automatic responses in the observer that need managing

Appendix 5

Reflective Journal Extract

18/10/2013. I have decided to choose at random which one to analyse first. I wonder whether it could affect the analysis if I do them in the order of the interviews. There is perhaps a desire on my part to analyse the interviews of those with training and experience most closely resembling my own. Maybe I am looking for confirmation of my own experience? If that is the case then I wonder whether that would affect any subsequent analysis.

25/10/2013. Everything is taking a lot longer than I expected. However what I have discovered is that a short interview can be exceptionally rich and powerful.

15/10/2013. The first analysis – I thought I had identified emergent themes, but on re-reading some seemed more like clumsy narrative descriptions rather than actual themes.

22/10/2013. Cut up the themes and put them on the table – over 100. All looks a bit overwhelming Easily found common themes and then realised I was simply grouping them according to the questions I asked – so it appears my preconceptions were guiding this. Realised that I could not then easily identify what had come from where – back to the drawing board – or maybe try leaving them on a pin board and reflecting on it? I have decided to draw up themes on the computer.

06/12/2013. I should be developing categories by working from the themes and comments rather than the text – but keep re-reading the text and keep finding more in it. I have been thinking about Jonathon's Smith 2011 Paper where he talks about 'diving for pearls' – lots of discussion about it on the IPA blog. There seem to be some insightful thoughts in my transcripts, but are they gems? Do they offer a new perspective upon the analysis?

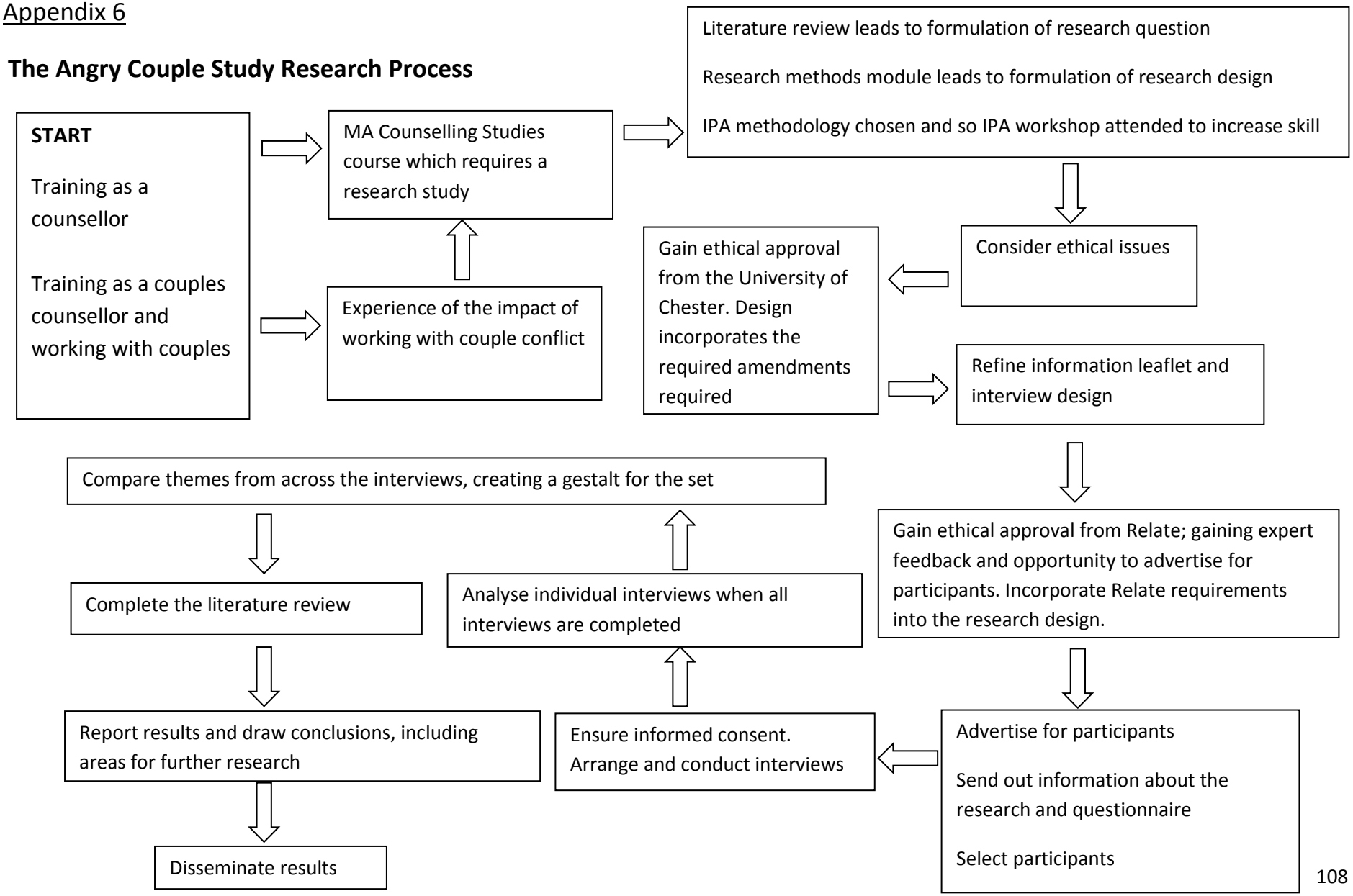
20/12/2013. I have considerably reduced the numbers of themes now. Some ideas I had named themes merged together – am getting a stronger picture of what a theme actually is now. Have had to go back and check line numbers as cutting and pasting has resulted in some muddle
Much easier to identify themes if using tables with a cell for each theme – easier to cut and paste without affecting the line numbers.

25/12/2013. Back to little pieces of paper! Found a pin board and used that – seemed to work quite well. Then returned to lists on the computer – seem to keep needing to switch modes of thinking / processing. It has taken longer to arrive at the super-ordinate themes than analysing the text.
Keep thinking my ideas are very superficial. This is all taking too long. Contacted Rita to put back the supervision date. Keep coming back to the themes – and trying to condense ideas – too many there

07/01/2014. E-mailed T. and said I was stuck going round and round in a hermeneutic circle. She said at least there was movement so something was happening. Rita implied one could go on constantly analysing things. Did I understand right? If so, then when does one know when to stop?

Appendix 6

The Angry Couple Study Research Process



Appendix 7

Confidentiality Compliance Form

Confidentiality Compliance Form for a Co-researcher Cross-checking the IPA Coding of Anonymised Transcripts

UNIVERSITY OF CHESTER

M.A. in Counselling Studies Research

I.....

understand and undertake to abide by the ethical principles and procedures embodied in the proposed research study: **The Angry Couple: A Qualitative Exploration of how Couple Counsellors Experience being Affected by Working with Conflict** to be undertaken by Carola Haywood.

I am a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and can confirm that all data will be kept securely and in accordance to BACP research guidelines.

Signed

[Co- researcher].....

Date.....

Signed

[Researcher].....

Date.....

Appendix 8

Letter to Interested Participant

Researcher address and telephone number.
Email:carola.haywood@btinternet.com

Name of Counsellor

Address

Date

Dear……..

Research Study - The Angry Couple: A Qualitative Exploration of how Couple Counsellors Experience being Affected by Working with Conflict.

Thank you for expressing an interest in this research study.

It is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve, so please read the attached information sheet carefully before you decide to participate. If you then wish to take part, please return the attached questionnaire to myself. Your answers will tell me whether you meet the inclusion criteria for this study and I will of course reply to everyone who contacts me.

Participants are asked to sign a consent form before the research interview (a sample copy is enclosed); however you would still be free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Your interest in this study is greatly appreciated and I hope you will decide to participate. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information or clarification of any point.

Yours sincerely,

Carola

Carola Haywood (MBACP Accredited)

Appendix 9

Information Sheet

Information sheet about the research study

The Angry Couple: A Qualitative Exploration of how Couple Counsellors Experience being Affected by Working with Conflict.

What is the purpose of the study?

This small scale study seeks to enrich our understanding of counsellors' experiences of working with conflict between couples. There is limited research in this area and improving understanding could enhance training, supervision and counsellor awareness. This study uses a qualitative methodology and is not seeking to prove or disprove a hypothesis, but to deepen understanding of a subject through a focused discussion. It is intended that the project will be completed in 2012.

Who is the researcher?

I am a post-graduate diploma qualified counsellor with twelve years of experience of working with couples and I am currently a student at the University of Chester in the Department of Social Studies and Counselling. This study is being undertaken as part of my MA in Counselling Studies. I am organising and funding this research myself and there will be no payment for taking part.

Who has reviewed this study?

Ethical approval has been granted by the Department of Social Studies and Counselling Ethics Committee at the University of Chester and Relate.

Who will be taking part?

The main requirements are that participants must have at least three years experience of clinical work, have been in supervised practice within the past three years and be a member of a professional organisation that upholds a recognised ethical code. Participants must either (a) hold a Diploma in Counselling and have had couples counselling training equivalent to the Relate conversion course (which requires 40 hours experience of couples work) or (b) have been trained in couples counselling to at least the standard of the Relate Certificate in Marital and Couple Counselling or Relate's University Advanced Diploma: Introduction to Couple Counselling. It is also important that participants have had training and experience of casework where there has been domestic violence.

What would prevent me from taking part?

Participants whose only clinical experience has been with couples in specialities such as psychosexual therapy, will not be included. Participants who have no experience or training in domestic violence will not be included. Participants who are currently taking sick leave following difficulties working with couple conflict will not be included.

What will happen to me if I take part?

As a participant in this study you would be asked to take part in an interview which will last approximately 60 – 90 minutes. This can take place in the researcher's home in Kelsall, Cheshire, in a therapy room in Upton, Chester or at a place of your choice in your own location.

The interviews are intended to be an open and broad discussion about the impact upon the counsellor of working with couple conflict. The focus is upon the counsellor's reactions and not client material. I ask that references made to your work do not identify any individual client.

I intend to explore the impact of working with couple conflict upon the counsellor; both inside and outside the counselling room, possible effects upon the personal or professional life of the counsellor and what the counsellor believes may have influenced those reactions. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and anonymised using a code. You will later be able to review, edit or delete any part of the transcription, without needing to give any reason for your decisions.

The principal interview questions

1. When an angry argument erupts between a couple that you are working with, what does that usually mean to you?

2. Please describe a time when you have felt affected in some way by couple conflict in a session. I am particularly interested in exploring a session where at the time; as far as you were aware there was no domestic violence between the couple. What was that like for you? What happened to you afterwards?

3. To what extent has the experience of working with arguing couples had an effect upon your relationship with other people?

4. Please describe any ways that working with couple conflict has led to any changes in the way you think or feel about yourself.

5. How have personal experiences influenced you when working with conflict?

6. How have training, supervision and experience influenced your reaction when working with angry couples?

What are the possible benefits or risks of taking part?

As a participant in this study you are contributing to further understanding of how the counsellor can react to working with conflict. Participation also offers you a space to reflect upon how this aspect of couple work may have affected you.

The potential risks are minimal and are far less than working with couple conflict itself. In the unlikely event that you feel that participation leads you to require further support you are encouraged to take any issues that arise to either counselling or supervision. There will be time given to debrief when the interview has ended. You do not have to answer any questions that you prefer not to answer. You may stop the interview and/or withdraw from the study without explanation at any time, up until the dissertation has been submitted for publication.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

This research will be conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. All personally identifying information will be kept confidential, subject to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Quotations from your interview may be used in my dissertation but no identifying information about yourself, your clients or the location of your place of work will be included. You may prefer to choose a pseudonym for the interview itself, but in the published research you will be referred to only by a code. In the event of any information that could identify any client being inadvertently disclosed by you, this will be deleted.

How will information be stored?

Any information that you give me will be stored securely; electronically using password protection and encryption, while hard copies or tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet.

I will be the only person to know the identity of the participants in the study, but others will have access to the data. In addition to a co-researcher who will be cross-checking the coding of anonymised transcripts, the research supervisor, the internal assessor and the external examiner will also have access to the research material. After five years the data will be destroyed either through electronic deletion or through shredding. Audio recordings will be destroyed after the M.A. has been awarded.

How will I be sent the transcription?

Anonymised transcriptions of the interview will be offered to you for checking. Before the interview you will be asked to choose how you would like to receive this. The choices offered are:

1. E-mail; using password protected documents and encryption when e-mailing the transcription. A different password will be created by each participant allowing only them to decrypt the e-mail.
2. Registered Royal Mail post; using double packaging and ensuring that no details are included that could allow others to identify the data as being the participant's interview material.
3. First class Royal Mail Post; using double packaging and ensuring that no details are included that could allow others to identify the data as being the participant's own material.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this study will be available as a thesis which will be kept in the University of Chester Department of Social Studies and Counselling resource room and may also be available online through the University of Chester online repository. The results may later be made available through conference presentations or recognised professional publications.

What is in the consent form?

On the next page is a sample copy of the consent form that you would be asked to sign before the interview.

Who do I contact for further information?

Please contact myself; Carola Haywood on tel: xxxxxx or at carola.haywood@btinternet.com.
Address: xxxxxxxx

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor, Dr Rita Mintz at the Department of Social Studies and Counselling, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, e-mail r.mintz@chester.ac.uk. Tel:01244 512038

(X denotes information has been removed as the researcher does not wish this to remain in the public domain)

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M.A. in Counselling Studies Research

Consent Form

Audio Recording of Interview

I.....hereby give consent for the details of a written transcript based on an audio recorded interview with me and Carola Haywood to be used in preparation and as part of a research dissertation for the M.A. in Counselling Studies at the University of Chester. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and that all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the research data. I further understand that the transcript may be seen by a Co-researcher, Counselling Tutors and External Examiner for the purpose of assessment and moderation. I also understand that all these people are bound by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

I understand that I will have access to the transcribed material should I wish to and I would be able to delete or amend any part of it. I am aware that I can stop the interview at any point, or ultimately withdraw the interview before the publication of the dissertation. Excerpts from the transcript, and possibly the entire transcript, may be included in the dissertation.

A copy of the dissertation will be held in the University of Chester and may be available electronically. In line with University of Chester regulations the data obtained from the interviews will be held by the researcher for a period of five years and then destroyed. Without my consent some of the material may be used for publication and/or presentations at conferences and seminars. Every effort will be made to ensure complete anonymity.

Finally I believe I have been given sufficient information about the nature of this research including any possible risks, to give informed consent to participate.

Signed [Participant].....Date.....

Signed [Researcher].....Date.....

Appendix 10

Delivery Choices for Participants

The choices offered:

1. E-mail; using password protected documents and encryption when e-mailing the transcription. The researcher has purchased a secure system using SSL Post (http://www.sslpost.com/). A different password is created by each user, allowing only them to decrypt the e-mail. The encryption facility ensures protection of material while in transit over the web; additional password protection and an audit trail shows when material has been received and opened.

2. Royal Mail post; using registered post, double packaging and ensuring that no details are included that could allow others to identify the data as being the participant's own material. The transcript will be sent to the participant in a package containing an inner envelope marked "*to be opened only by (name of participant) in person"*. The sent material will include a return address in the event of non-delivery.

3. Royal Mail Post; using first class post, double packaging and ensuring that no details are included that could allow others to identify the data as being the participant's own material. The transcript will be sent to the participant in a package containing an inner envelope marked "*to be opened only by (name of participant) in person"*. The sent material will include a return address in the event of non-delivery.

Appendix 11

The Questionnaire

X denotes information removed as the researcher does not wish all personal contact details to remain in the public domain.

The Questionnaire:

For potential participants in the research study: "The Angry Couple: A Qualitative Exploration of how Couple Counsellors Experience being Affected by Working with Conflict".

Where relevant please circle **YES / NO**

1. Do you feel you have been affected in any way by working with angry couples? **YES / NO**
Please include positive and negative reactions; single or repeated reactions. Please only include reactions where, at the time, as far as you were aware, there was no domestic violence in the relationship.

2. Have you experienced any of these responses to working with angry couples since completing your couple counselling training? **YES / NO**

3. Please state your main counselling/psychotherapy qualifications.

4. Please indicate the length of your couples training and training institution

5. Have you had training in working domestic violence and abuse? **YES / NO**

6. Have you had any experience of working with cases involving domestic violence and abuse? **YES / NO**

7. Please circle which theoretical approaches you use with couples. If answering other, what approach do you use?

Person-centred	Systemic	Narrative Therapy	C.B.T.	T.A.
Behavioural	Psychodynamic	Emotionally Focused Therapy		Gestalt Therapy
Imago Therapy	Solution-Focused Therapy	Experiential Therapy	NLP	Other

8. How many years of experience as a counsellor do you have.....

9. Approximately how many hours of couple counselling experience do you have.....

10. In what context have you worked with couples (e.g. in private practice, N.H.S or with a national charity)

11. Have you been working in supervised practice within the past three years? **YES / NO**

12. If you are not currently able to work as a counsellor, is this related to issues that have arisen following working with angry couples? **YES / NO**

13. Please state whether you are a member of a professional organisation that requires you to work to a code of ethics? **YES / NO**

Name of professional organisation.....

14. Would you be able to access personal counselling if issues arise as a result of participating in this study? **YES / NO**

15. Are you: **Male / Female / Other**

PLEASE ENTER YOUR CONTACT DETAILS HERE

Title and name:

Telephone number and the best times to phone:

Address:

E-mail:

Please return this form to Carola Haywood at carola.haywood@btinternet.com or post to xxxxx. Further information may be obtained from Carola Haywood via e-mail or telephone xxxxx

Thank you very much for your interest and time

Appendix 12

The Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF CHESTER

M.A. in Counselling Studies Research

Consent Form

Audio Recording of Interview

I.....hereby give consent for the details of a written transcript based on an audio recorded interview with me and Carola Haywood to be used in preparation and as part of a research dissertation for the M.A. in Counselling Studies at the University of Chester. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and that all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the research data. I further understand that the transcript may be seen by a Co-researcher, Counselling Tutors and External Examiner for the purpose of assessment and moderation. I also understand that all these people are bound by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

I understand that I will have access to the transcribed material should I wish to and I would be able to delete or amend any part of it. I am aware that I can stop the interview at any point, or ultimately withdraw the interview before the publication of the dissertation. Excerpts from the transcript, and possibly the entire transcript, may be included in the dissertation.

A copy of the dissertation will be held in the University of Chester and may be available electronically. In line with University of Chester regulations the data obtained from the interviews will be held by the researcher for a period of five years and then destroyed. Without my consent some of the material may be used for publication and/or presentations at conferences and seminars. Every effort will be made to ensure complete anonymity.

Finally I believe I have been given sufficient information about the nature of this research including any possible risks, to give informed consent to participate.

Signed [Participant].....Date.....

Signed [Researcher].....Date.....

Appendix 13

The Interview Guide

Pre-interview statements and checks

First I would like to really thank you for giving your time to do this interview. I am researching couple counsellors' experiences of working with overt angry conflict and how this affects the counsellor both inside and outside the counselling room. As you have indicated that you have experienced strong reactions to working with conflict I felt that your perspective would be really valuable.

Before we start I just want to remind you that myself and anyone else involved in this research are all bound by the BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice.

If there are any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering please feel free to say you would prefer not to answer them and of course you can stop the interview at any time. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without needing to give any reason for doing so.

- Check co-researchers understanding of confidentiality within this context and that they remain happy about having signed the consent form.
- Check how the participant would like to be sent the anonymised transcription
- Does the participant want to use a pseudonym for the interview?

I will give you a list of local counsellors in case this interview raises any difficult personal issues. What are your thought about where you would want to get support to discuss any issues that arose?

Is there anything you would like to ask me before we start?

Turn on audio recorder

While there has been research into the impact of working with domestic violence it is suggested that most of the effects result from working with traumatic material**. For this reason I am asking you to try and separate out any reactions to casework where you knew at the time that there had been domestic violence.**

My own interests in this topic has grown from recognising that working with couples in conflict, while a routine part of the work, could also be challenging and generate strong emotions within me.

Interview Schedule

1. How has your work with angry couples changed since you first started working with couples?

Possible prompts: / what did you expect it to be like before working with clients/how well prepared do you feel that you were/what training was helpful/ what would have been helpful/what messages have you had from your professional context about this aspect of the work

2. When an angry argument erupts between a couple that you are working with, what does that usually mean to you?

Possible prompts: what theories do you draw upon/what do you notice most in the couple/ what do you see as your role as a counsellor/ what do you feel/ what do you do/ what do you think/how do you usually respond/what do you hope will happen/what do you fear might happen/what is the most significant thing you have learnt from this work

3. I am curious about any connection you may see between your gender (or other aspects of your social context) that may have affected your experience of working with couple conflict?

Possible prompts: what impact do you imagine that your gender has had upon your work with couple conflict/how is the work different when working with different age groups/SOCIAL GRRAACCEES

4. Please describe a time when you have felt affected in some way by couple conflict in a session. I am interested in exploring a session where at the time you were not aware of any domestic violence between the couple. What was that like for you and what happened to you afterwards?

Possible prompts: how was this different from what usually happens for you/how long did the feelings last/ how did you cope/ what did you do/ who did you turn to/what was it like to share those feelings/how supported did you feel by your supervisor or agency/how did this affect any subsequent work with this couple/what effect did that have on your work with other couples

5. When working with couple conflict what has helped or hindered you in seeking supervisory support?

Possible prompts: how difficult is this to discuss/ what reactions have you encountered/what have been your expectations/what has been most helpful

6. To what extent has the experience of working with arguing couples had an effect upon your relationship with other people

Possible prompts: family/partner/ public relationships/ what have others noticed/ behaviours with others

7. Please describe any ways that working with couple conflict has led to any changes in the way you think or feel about yourself.

Possible prompt: do you see yourself now as being different from before you began to work with angry couples/ do you feel that conflict in relationships means something different for you now / do you manage conflict differently outside the counselling room / would your life have been different if you had not had these experiences.

8. In what way has training or supervision helped you understand your relationship between personal experiences and working professionally with conflict?

Possible prompts: childhood experiences/ adult relationships / what differences are there in the way that you react in your personal and professional situations when encountering couple conflict

9. Is there anything else that you wish I had asked you about this topic, or that you feel would have been useful to explore in more depth?

10. Reflecting before finishing, I am wondering whether talking about this topic has led to any changes in the way you think or feel about this aspect of couple work.

- Debrief
- Thank you

Appendix 14

Advertising for Participants

A call for participants went to couple counselling agencies within the North West and nationally within Marriage Care, Relate, and on the BACP on-line research notice-board. It is a Relate requirement that ethical approval is gained through them in order to advertise internally and so this was obtained. Marriage Care also required substantial information about the research before agreeing to advertise internally. X denotes information removed as the researcher does not wish this to remain in the public domain.

Advertisement placed on the research notice-board in 'Therapy' magazine.

The Angry Couple: MA researcher seeks counsellors to interview about the impact on the therapist of working with angry couples. I will travel to interview you. Contact Carola at carola.haywood@btinternet.com

Poster advertisement for national agencies

Participants sought for Masters level research into the impact upon therapists of working with couple conflict

I am looking for counsellors/psychotherapists who feel they have been personally or professionally affected by working with angry couples.

- Do you have at least three years of clinical practice working with either individuals or couples?
- Do you have a qualification in working with couples?

If you have answered yes to the above questions, are willing to complete a short questionnaire and are interested in taking part in an interview (at a place convenient for you) then I would be very pleased to hear from you.

E-mail carola.haywood@btinternet.com Telephone: xxxxxxx

Carola Haywood has ethical approval from the University of Chester to carry out this research. Relate has also given ethical approval for Relate counsellors to participate in this study

Appendix 15

Examples of Coded Transcripts

Participant A (Anna). Lines 152-175	Initial coding Plain text: descriptive and exploratory Italic text: linguistic Underlined text: conceptual
Counsellor: It is Interesting; well looking back and thinking about it I feel there is more anger expressed in the room now than there was when I started. I wonder whether that was about clients sensing of you being able to contain stuff. So I wondered if actually people are feeling more held now I can express that. Personally, anger has been difficult for me in the past and I think there has been a process of me becoming more comfortable with anger; understanding it differently, (sort of understanding the anxiety behind anger more). And it's (yes), I think that when I started working with clients, people would come and they would describe arguments. Like I said, they wouldn't play it out in the room so much and I very much used a systemic approach (drawing up the pattern of an argument). And I think for me that was [pause] I think that is a very good thing that training in systemic work can do; it can (for clients as well), it can structure things, it can give you that kind of observer perspective. But I think what's changed in my practice is (like I said); I think that there's more sort of emotional expression in the room than there used to be.	Time comparison; recognising that anger is expressed more now than as a new counsellor *Wondering 'what causes this and what clients sense about me?* Counsellor as a container. What is the stuff? What happens if the stuff is not able to be contained by the therapist. Whose stuff needs to be contained? Does the therapist need to be able to express anger for the clients to feel held? How do clients feel held or not held? Holding herself before and now holding the clients? Needing reassurance in the face of anxiety Anger used to be difficult Becoming comfortable with anger is a process A different understanding of the anxiety behind anger increases comfort – or lessens discomfort? *'Yes emphasises the strength of perception of how much things have changed* *'Describing' arguments is different from 'playing it out'* *'Play' as performing, dramatising, play out, dramatising? How real is the play?* *Repetition of value of systemic theory training: can structure, can give observer perspective.* Structures something without form – gain control? Gave her an observer perspective on her own relationship with anger as well?

Participant B (Beth). Lines 152-175	Initial coding Plain text: descriptive and exploratory Italic text: linguistic Underlined text: conceptual
Interviewer: You describe a sense of being able to manage angry couples differently. What do you do differently? Counsellor: er, what do I do differently? Er, it's hard to know what one does oneself – you just do it, er [pause]. Maybe the build-up; when you have an understanding of it you can get through to the couple, you can help them to see what's going on (you know, the attacking the withdrawing and how that feels to each) and, um, yes, I suppose if you remain feeling calm you look calmer to them. And I imagine if you are feeling all uptight and upset and anxious about it all, I imagine that probably comes across. But if you are feeling OK with it they will probably pick up on that; a bit like a mother who does not get into a frightful state when the child's having a tantrum. It helps to calm the whole situation I think. Interviewer: so with greater theoretical knowledge and greater control of your own emotion, bringing calmness to the situation. Counsellor: yes and maybe an understanding of your own emotions and keeping that boundary; that is theirs and this is me. I don't have to take on all of this; I can observe it over there. So perhaps it is that; to observe more than to absorb.	Sounds surprised by the question Hard to know what one does oneself – so why is it hard? Who would know? *The build up*- what is a build-up? Building up to what? She sees and understands the couple's pattern (systemic drawing up of the couple's conflict cycle?) Understanding creates connection? Hasn't *thought* about what she does....? Trying to make sense of herself Communicating her understanding to the clients Through being able to understand the couple the counsellor becomes understandable to the couple and they can be helped to understand their process. A process of understanding A calm counsellor looks calm to the client and *calms* the whole situation. Indicates a situation that is not calm An uptight anxious counsellor looks uptight and anxious which will influence clients. Clients will pick up the counsellor's anxiety Comparison between clients and children's tantrums. Ego states? Comparison between adults and children Mother as *frightful dual meaning – frightful as meaning full of fright? Fearful or a terribly state?* Understanding *own emotions* aids clarity about the boundary between self and clients, enabling *observation not absorption* Clarity on herself firms the boundary, and stops their identity being sucked into hers – or do they suck her into them? I am not obliged to take this? – that is not my responsibility/ – holding a distance

Participant C (Cath). Lines 563-598	Initial coding Plain text: descriptive and exploratory Italic text: linguistic Underlined text: conceptual
I hate seeing arguing couples, now, still. But I think I probably always did, um. I think I realise now it's a dynamic, so, er (I am not working so I don't point it out obviously). I think I notice it's a dynamic; I notice it more in my own couple. I mean obviously my partner (if you can call him a partner because he lives on the other side of the world); I don't think that is a coincidence. We have chosen each other because he is miles away, as he has chosen me I imagine, because I am miles away. We see each other a lot, but, um, so there could be something about distance, about not being too close. I think if you are alone in a room with an angry couple you are very close and very involved, but you are also an outsider because you are that third party. I think I would run a mile from an angry couple to be honest (I don't mean literally), but I would pretty quickly catch onto what was going on; the underlying damage (not damage), the dynamic that is going on between them. Has living with those experiences over many years led to any changes of my own? I don't, but I don't, yes, er, [pause], that's really difficult, I don't really know, I can't think of any changes. I am still really interested in the work and the ideas; it's just that the reality of it is harder and most couples...I do still have friends who are couple counsellors; most counsellors I know tend to not like it actually and avoid it (I suppose I did). [pause] I think I might be a bit more understanding of couples really, and a bit more, um [pause] easy, you know. I am trying to think; it's hard.....	*Hates* seeing arguing couples – that has not changed Has always hated seeing arguing couples. Hate is stronger than dislike. Does this relate to seeing her parents argue when she was a child? No longer seeing couples professionally Now aware of the *dynamic* – Thinking about the unconscious processes. Not *pointing it out* to couples who are not clients. Maybe reassuring the interviewer that this awareness is not used outside work and boundaries are maintained? In work she was *pointing it out*? Calling attention to the dynamics Noticing changes in her own relationship Thinking about the dynamics in her own relationship Thinking about the unconscious 'couple fit' in her own relationship Balancing intimacy and distance in her personal relationship In the room: *close and involved* versus *outside and a 3rd party* Again, balancing intimacy and distance *I would run a mile* – emphasising the strength of feeling about how unpleasant this feels for her Emphasising that this is a metaphor and is not to be taken literally *Underlying damage* corrects herself, but perhaps she sees the angry couple dynamic as damaging? Now more aware of the dynamic, the process between the couple Uncertainty about whether the work has led to any changes in her own relationship with anger. Maybe wondering whether the question implies that there should have been changes. *Repeated emphasis upon not knowing.* Hesitant about saying no? Comparing her interest in the work with the reality of the difficulty of the work Other couple counsellors dislike and avoid couple work *I suppose* I did Questioning self? Whether she did Comparing her own perception of the work with that of counsellor friends. Seeking validation of her experience? More understanding? In opposition to earlier statement that as she worked more with angry couples she became less empathic In the new relationship she is more open about her needs A difference over time Differences between the way she is in this and has been in other relationships Hard to think about her change and hard to do the work. *Repetition of "I think" suggests trying to work this idea out now*

Participant D (Dana). Lines 213-243	Initial coding Plain text: descriptive Italic text: linguistic Underlined text: conceptual
Counsellor: It has had an effect. I have a close friend who is quite like my father (at least, superficially he is quite like my father). I used to be a bit afraid of him, even though was a very good friend and he never did anything to make me afraid. But having worked with couples, it's like with him; when he does that thing that feels scary like my dad used to do, I feel that it's not.... it's like his fear or his anxiety or something. It's not anger. It has helped with that relationship: I feel I understand a lot better. Interviewer: Which aspect of working with angry couples helped you unpick that? Counsellor: I suppose because you deconstruct the anger and you find out where it comes from Interviewer: So it's looking at that aspect of emotional expression in real depth, that deconstruction and that intellectual understanding? Counsellor: There is something about cause and effect I think: seeing what has caused the anger. It's like if you can understand the roots of it.....is that what I mean? I don't know if that is what I mean. What were we saying? I know what it is! It is finding the person's vulnerability.	A friend she was afraid of.... ? Superficial similarities to father … *father was scary* Childhood experiences Some things that father and friend did felt scary Learnt to see the friend's reaction as his fear or anxiety – more understanding Expanded inner experiencing creating trust in others and self? *"It's not anger"*- Understanding the root of the anger transforms it for her. Or is this misidentifying anger? Helpful to understand the source of anger Helpful to deconstruct – <u>take it apart</u> <u>Looking for the source</u> <u>Seeing the cause leads to a different view of the effect</u> The *root* – what it grows from, what hold it up. <u>So what happens to the roots when they are understood?</u> Not sure of her meaning – asking herself what she means – <u>A struggle to work out what she thinks – new thoughts about this</u> Finishes processing her thoughts and recognises that it is *finding the vulnerability* <u>Sounds excited by the thought</u> *Finding* vulnerability suggests something buried – hidden treasure? Something to look for <u>Vulnerability as an opposite of the power of anger?</u>

Participant E (Ella). Lines 73-105	Initial coding Plain text: descriptive Italic text: linguistic Underlined text: conceptual
There's something, (that's probably because safety is the.....), because anger is such a live emotion and a physical one, and you can feel it in your body and you can feel it in the room and your stomach and everyone can feel it. That it's a kind of arousal emotion. And I think whenever people get aroused there's an unsafe feeling: a cat out of the bag, a Pandora's Box or a sense of opening up. And I suppose the client's are maybe there because they do the opening up at home and you don't know what happens after (whether it spills out into the family or whether the kids see it). So on the one hand they are showing you the opening up, but as a counsellor I think we have some kind of responsibility to help them see if they can hold it. But I think initially I think we can help them by seeming like we can hold it. I think there is something about modelling or validating emotion and trying not to get into the blame game bit because they will get into that. And they will pull you about [*pause*] like "*they're wrong*" or "*they're wrong*" and all that stuff. Um and sometimes I think the warm authority is the bit of you that's able to oversee to be able to get how is this helpful? Or, you know, while appreciating that they're role playing it out for you they are acting it out or demonstrating it or whatever they're doing. Also trying to draw attention to "what are they going to do about it? Do their kids see it or what?"They're obviously there because they want it to stop in some way. They want it to [*pause*] because it's hard to control and hard to manage.	Anger as a *physical* emotion - Anger as an embodied presence Anger as a *live* emotion – Are some emotions not alive? Does not alive mean dead? Unsafe Releasing danger The uncertain consequences – never knowing what dangers may be released Concern for the children – Thinking about the client's context Viewing, holding, helping to hold Modelling how to hold the anger. A *responsibility* to show that anger can be held The Responsibility is attached to the counsellor role It is helpful to just show that the counsellor can hold it – that is in itself an intervention Help by *appearing* to hold it – can the counsellor appear to hold it but not be really? Risks of being pulled into judgement – *the blame game* Idea of a game: winners and losers Clients pulling her in different directions Trying to find how this helps the client – looking for the function of anger A caretaking role. Warm authority not cold authority Role play/acting/ is this so real? Focusing upon the client taking responsibility Concern for the children Warm authority – beneficial influence - Safety concerns - Responsibility concerns - What about the children? - Counsellor's responsibility

Appendix 16

Finding Emerging Themes: An Example

Original transcript	Exploratory comments and coding Plain text: descriptive Italic text: linguistic Underlined text: conceptual	Emergent themes
Interviewer: I am Interested in what way you might feel that your work with angry couples may have changed over the years Counsellor: It is Interesting; well looking back and thinking about it I feel there is more anger expressed in the room now than there was when I started. I wonder whether that was about clients sensing of you being able to contain stuff. So I wondered if actually people are feeling more held now I can express that. Personally, anger has been difficult for me in the past and I think there has been a process of me becoming more comfortable with anger; understanding it differently, (sort of understanding the anxiety behind anger more). And it's (yes), I think that when I started working with clients, people would come and they would describe arguments. Like I said, they wouldn't play it out in the room so much and I very much used a systemic approach (drawing up the pattern of an argument). And I think for me that was [pause] I think that is a very good thing that training in systemic work can do; it can (for clients as well), it can structure things, it can give you that kind of observer perspective. But I think what's changed in my practice is (like I said); I think that there's more sort of emotional expression in the room than there used to be.	Time comparison; recognising that anger is expressed more now than as a new counsellor *Wondering 'what causes this and what clients sense about me?* Counsellor as a container. What is the stuff? What happens if the stuff is not able to be contained by the therapist? Whose stuff needs to be contained? Does the therapist need to be able to express anger for the clients to feel held? How do clients feel held or not held? Holding herself before and now holding the clients? Needing reassurance in the face of anxiety Anger used to be difficult Becoming comfortable with anger is a process A different understanding of the anxiety behind anger increases comfort – or lessens discomfort? *'Yes emphasises the strength of perception of how much things have changed* *'Describing' arguments is different from 'playing it out'* *'Play' as performing, dramatising, play out, dramatising? How real is the play?* *Repetition of value of systemic theory training: can structure, can give observer perspective.* Structures something without form – gain control? Gave her an observer perspective on her own relationship with anger?	Temporal comparison The self perceived by others Containing emotion Becoming comfortable with anger is a process Holding anger Client responsiveness to counsellor A changed relationship between anger and self Containing anger Structuring anger

Appendix 17

An initial Theme List

Temporal comparison

The self perceived by others

Containing emotion

Becoming comfortable with anger is a process

Client responsiveness to counsellor

Holding anger

A changed relationship between anger and self

Containing anger

Structuring anger

Expressed anger

Clients' expression of anger

Using theory

Changes in professional practice

A significant presence

Noticing changes in clients

Clients sensing the counsellor's comfort with anger

A changing relationship between anger and self

Becoming comfortable with anger is a process

Anxiety about anger

From reported to lived experience

The value of theory

The challenge of facing strong emotions

Anger's relationship to other emotions

Childhood experiences

Childhood beliefs

Supervision facilitating understanding

Self reflection

From a theoretical to emotional connection

Emotional connection risks helplessness

Transference

The overwhelmed self

The frightened helpless child self

The paralysed professional self

Anger as a guide

Sensitivity to anger

Aspects of self

Soothing the self

Managing different selves

Awareness within self

Emotional avoidance

The child self

The professional self

Expanding experiencing

The nurturing self

An unprepared self

Tension

Responsibility towards self

Parental self 'holding' the child-self

Journal writing

Work-home transitions

Reflexive processing

Self-care

Temporal markers

Self-affirmation

Transitional spaces

Work clinging

Coping with the work

Coping with anger

Difference between individual work and couples

Fear of destruction

Fear of anger

Coping with anger

Supportive supervision

Formative supervision

Changed relationship with significant others

Learning to value anger

Accepting and experiencing her own angry feelings

Learning to express and use anger assertively
.
Partner's changing relationship with anger

Surviving anger

Influencing others

Work influencing personal development

Accepting and experiencing her own angry feelings

Facing personal fears is part of the work

Work illuminating personal issues

Reflexivity

Modelling a healthy relationship with anger

Clarifying boundaries

Growing assertiveness

Responding to anger

Unconscious process

Transitional spaces and rituals

Personal space

Women's anger

Relationship with anger

Connecting with childhood

Angry women risk rejection

More fearful with angry women

Heightened anxiety urges her to stop the anger

Physical sensations indicate anxiety

The vulnerable self needs comforting

Self-talk

Containing anger

The containing self

Anger as an entity

Externalising interventions

Containing anger

Parental roles

Distancing from anger

Ego states

The overwhelmed self

The paralysed professional

Awareness

Blames self as responsible

Feeling inadequate

Shaken from confidence to shock and mistrust

Restorative supervision

Professional expectations

The critical self

Learning to self soothe

An enjoyable challenge

Uncertainty

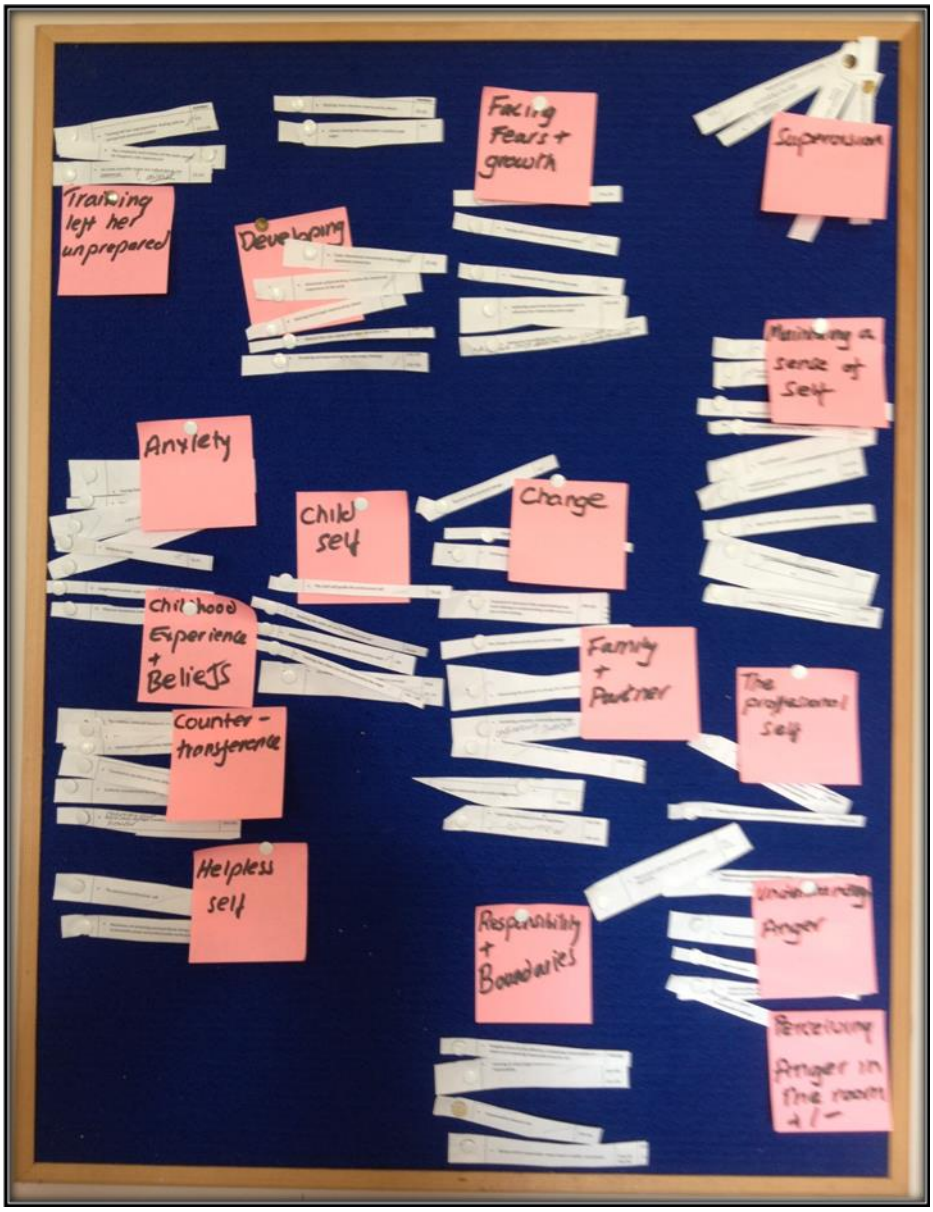
The responsible self

The gendered self

Observed anger

Appendix 18

Searching for Patterns using a Pin-board



Appendix 19

A Table Indicating a Phase in the Development of Super-ordinate Themes

Emergent theme	Super-ordinate themes in stages of development (Anna)		
Fear of anger Anxiety about angry women Observed anger Childhood experiences Emotional avoidance	Childhood experiences and fears impact the working self	The fearful self	Childhood experience impacts upon the counsellor self
Connecting with childhood Angry women risk rejection Women's anger Childhood beliefs The gendered self	Angry women are rejected	Angry women are rejected	
Heightened anxiety urges her to stop the anger The frightened helpless child self Anxiety about anger Tension Sensitivity to anger Body feelings indicate anxiety	The anxious self	The anxious self Physical responses	The work can arouse difficult emotions in the self of the counsellor
Shaken from confidence to shock and mistrust Uncertainty The vulnerable self	Shaken from confidence to shock and mistrust	Shaken from confidence to shock and mistrust	
Professional expectations Blames self as responsible The critical self Feeling inadequate	The critical self		
The overwhelmed self The paralysed professional self Unconscious process The overwhelmed self The paralysed professional Transference Emotional connection risks helplessness An unprepared self	The paralysed professional	The paralysed professional: countertransference	
Ego states The child self Aspects of self The professional self Parental roles	Managing different aspects of self	A responsibility to manage self	The challenges of working with anger
Managing different selves Soothing the self Distancing from anger Self-talk Parental self 'holding' the child-self	A responsibility to self		
Clients sensing the counsellor's comfort with anger Client responsiveness to counsellor	Holding self; holding clients	Holding self; holding clients	
Externalising interventions Using theory Structuring anger The value of theory Anger's relationship to other emotions	The professional analytical self	The professional analytical self	
Containing anger The responsible self Containing emotion	The challenge of containing anger	The challenges of containing anger	

Containing anger Containing anger The containing self An enjoyable challenge			
Observed anger Anger as an entity From reported to lived experience A significant presence Clients' expression of anger Anger as a guide Expressed anger	Finding significance in observing anger	A significant presence	The challenges of working with anger
Supportive supervision Restorative supervision Supervision facilitating understanding	Supervision as a support	Supervision as a support	Coping with the impact
Formative supervision	Blocks to supervision	Blocks to supervision	
Transitional spaces and rituals Personal space Journal writing Work-home transitions Self-talk	Self-care strategies	Maintaining a sense of self	
Learning to self soothe Awareness Self reflection Self-care Reflexive processing Responsibility towards self The nurturing self	A responsibility towards self		
Work influencing personal development Facing personal fears is part of the work Work illuminating personal issues Temporal comparison Relationship with anger Reflexivity Coping with anger Surviving anger From a theoretical to emotional connection Accepting and experiencing her own angry feelings Changes in professional practice The self perceived by others Becoming comfortable with anger is a process	Becoming comfortable with anger is a process	A process of becoming more comfortable with anger	Personal and professional growth
Growing assertiveness Learning to express and use anger assertively Responding to anger Changed relationship with significant others Clarifying boundaries Temporal comparison Accepting and experiencing her own angry feelings A changed relationship between anger and self Learning to value anger The challenge of facing strong emotions Awareness within self Expanding experiencing	A changed relationship between anger and self	Learning to assert relational needs A changed personal relationship with anger	
Changes in partner Influencing others Modelling a healthy relationship with anger Noticing changes in clients	Influencing others to change	Relational influence	

Appendix 20

Tables of Themes for Individual Participants

Anna

Super ordinate theme	Cluster themes	In vivo quote and line number
Childhood experience impacts upon the counsellor self	Childhood experience impacts upon the counsellor self	*And I know that when anger is there in the room there is a lot that goes on for me with how I grew up with understanding and receiving anger when I was growing up* (A/ 74-76)
	Angry women are rejected	*I think of being rejected as a woman expressing anger, I think that it's more a risk of being rejected by a partner* (A/226-227)
The work can arouse difficult emotions in the self of the counsellor	The anxious self	*I know that my anxiety, when I feel more anxious I have the urge then to shut it down* (A:233)
	Bodily responses	*I feel it in my body I can feel it in my stomach and my chest area* (A/236-237)
	The critical self	*I hadn't managed to overcome that, that sort of block in me about working with them ... I suppose I kind of failed them* (A: 289-294
	The paralysed professional: countertransference	*... it took me by surprise at the time. So it was only after the session that I was able to look back and think "I didn't do that; I went into that place". So it had a big impact on how I was in the room then* (A/269-270)
	Shaken from confidence to shock and mistrust	*I had been going along feeling more confident in my practice so I suppose that kind of shook me. And I suppose feeling like I wasn't able to ... (what I had relied upon, this professional, this rational kind of self, so, kind of, yes, kind of feeling I couldn't manage that, that I couldn't rely upon it), it didn't work that time. It did affect me* (A/290-295)
The challenges of working with anger	A responsibility to manage self	*So when you are in a room with an angry couple and there is this tension within yourself and this recognition that there is this child-self that is my feeling self I also need to take care of that* (A/106-109)
	Holding self; holding clients	*I feel there is more anger expressed in the room now than there was when I started. I wonder whether that was about clients sensing of you being able to contain stuff.... So I wondered if actually people are feeling more held now I can express that* (A/4-7)
	The professional analytical self	*And I think for me that was [pause] I think that is a very good thing that training in systemic work can do; it can (for clients as well), it can structure things, it can give you that kind of observer perspective* (A/15-18)
	The challenges of containing	*... well what I notice is that kind of rational*

	anger	*professional self comes up and kind of says "right we are going to stop this and have a look at what's going on". So it's, yes, I know that I rely on that* (A/246-249)
The challenges of working with anger	A significant presence	*When anger erupts in the room [pause]I think I find that helpful because I think it can give me clues about what's happening* (A/81)
Coping with the impact	Supervision as a support	*I had a helpful conversation with my supervisor about it where I sort of realised that what I had got into then was a this child-self that was feeling helpless and paralysed, and then I ended up sort of being in a critical parent* (A/295-298)
	Blocks to supervision	*I think when I felt more conscious of the aspect of the supervisory relationship that is about accountability and more sort of managerial, that's made it feel more difficult* (A/ 417-419)
	Maintaining a sense of self	*I have that dialogue with that child-self afterwards, usually after the evening is over and I travel on public transport - so usually, when I am travelling on the bus or I walk back. I journal as well, so when I get back home I kind of write about what has come up for me. And then I suppose more generally the travel is actually really helpful. It's a sort of transition. I don't find much that, um, I suppose it's having those little transition rituals* (A/118-124)
Personal and professional growth	A process of becoming more comfortable with anger	*Personally, anger has been difficult for me in the past and I think there has been a process of me becoming more comfortable with anger; understanding it differently, (sort of understanding the anxiety behind anger more)* (A/7-11)
	Learning to assert relational needs	*One thing I know I have done differently in this relationship, compared with past relationships is, um, being clearer on boundaries and setting boundaries* (A/184-186)
	A changed personal relationship with anger	*And I think for me conflict is one of the major issues [pause] that I have had to face in terms of how I manage it [pause]getting in touch with my own feelings of anger. That had a major impact* (A/170-175)
	Relational influence	*We have been together through this process of me developing as a counsellor and changing as a result of that. And it's interesting that he's been talking about a similar change in himself in terms of learning you can be angry and that's OK; that it doesn't destroy everything* (A:161-164)

Tables of themes for individual participants

Beth

Super ordinate theme	Cluster themes	In vivo quote and line number
Experiences in childhood	A bottled up anger	*Because in my family we kept it all bottled up and we would <u>not</u> get angry* (B/ 309- 310)
	The meaning of anger was failure	*I suppose the way that links for me was that I had a controlling mother and I would be trying to get things right and I would suddenly find I had got it all wrong. She was quite critical and controlling so in some ways it must have resonated with that a bit, that sense that I was doing my best and trying and despite that he was furious and stormed off* (B/42-47)
Becoming used to working with anger can be difficult	The fearful self	*And I found this very frightening because he was very angry because as I said, I wasn't used to clients storming off and leaving* (B/29-31)
	The bodily self	*A bodily sensation of sort of, it hits me here in the solar plexus; I can feel it...maybe I'm scared, but probably now I am just picking up theirs. Further back I might have been scared myself; the sensation is much the same as getting it wrong* (B/81-90)
	The inadequate self	*Sitting with anger, which I wasn't used to, I didn't like that. I found it quite alien and a resonating sense of not being good enough and of having got it wrong even though you are trying to get it right* (B/64-67)
	Coping with the impact	*The supervisor then in my mind held a different role in my mind, about whether I got it right or wrong. So maybe I would not be able to use supervision in the same way I did now Whereas now I would say: "Oh God I had this terrible couple and this happened, and oh dear" and then you can think about it together. Whereas if you are more waiting to get criticised (which didn't actually happen, but that was my fear and where I was then) (B/291-298)*
Understanding and managing feelings when working with couple conflict	Managing feelings calmly	*I suppose if you remain feeling calm you look calmer to them. And I imagine if you are feeling all uptight and upset and anxious about it all, I imagine that probably comes across. But if you are feeling OK with it they will probably pick up on that; a bit like a mother who does not get into a frightful state when the child's having a tantrum. It helps to calm the whole situation I think* (B/164-169)
	Observing and understanding the presence of anger	*I think once you can listen and hear what they are on about and put it into their own words and things then the anger goes and you can feel you understand them. So maybe, going back to the anger thing, maybe it is making that relationship*

		so they feel you hear them and really understand what they are going on about and see it from their point of view (B/248-243)
Developing through the work	From fear to acceptance	*I suppose I am much more accepting, I expect that it doesn't rattle me in the same way. I think years ago I would find it quite frightening and you would wonder what to do with it and the impact would be much greater. I think the impact is still there but you can manage it much better and you know how to deal with it and you know you have the skills to deal with it in a better way than when you first started* (B/5-11)
	Capability through experience	*I don't know, it's very hard because it's a bit trite to just say it comes with experience, but in a way it does. It comes with all the experience one has in having one's own therapy, of being with difficult clients and knowing more theoretically, having a greater understanding of what's going on. You understand it better, even though the out of control-ness of it and the noise of it I don't like it at all, but the dynamic of it you can understand and get your head around it better, so it doesn't feel so out of control* (B/139-146)
	Thoughts about training	*[It would have been helpful to have had training in] certain techniques about not staring and keeping your voice down rather than escalating, maybe watching videos and maybe it would be useful in training to have an understanding of all these different types of anger, what it looks like and how it is displayed and how you would work with that* (B/381-384)
	Personal change through maturity rather than the work	*No thanks to the couples I think, I can now be more assertive about it. I am not in the habit of ranting or shouting or going off and slamming doors on leaving. I can't see how working with couples might affect how I behave personally; it might have done but I doubt it. [Laughs] (B/329-323)*

Tables of themes for individual participants

Cath

Super ordinate theme	Cluster themes	In vivo quote and line number
Growing up with conflict	The child witness	*I think I probably saw my father as more sympathetic; my mother was much more of a victim I suppose in the relationship. My father was a much more powerful, stronger person and I probably identified with that for some reason. Definitely I tried to be more understanding with men, or actually, but of course my mother was more understanding with my father and it meant I actually took on her role come to think of it. She was the one who pretended that things weren't happening and understanding and things, so yes, that's probably why*(C/539-553)
	Believing conflict is resolvable	*I think, speaking personally, a lot of us go in with a bad internal couple and we are wanting to resolve that I think by trying to understand couples or to work with them, and that's why deep down there must be a feeling that something can get resolved.*(C/ 66-74)
The exhausting difficulties of the work	Feeling unsafe	*I think it must be some kind of grounding, some feeling of safety and security because you do feel very unsafe in a room with a couple that are [pause] He didn't scream, she screamed and shouted, yes ... So if you are dealing with someone like that it does feel very unsafe in the room, because they feel unsafe don't they* (C/131-138)
	Hanging on	*I would just long for them, for the sessions to end I would think. I would sometimes hold the chair a bit [pause]It would be a case of sitting it out* (C/121-123)
	Unconsciously working to resolve the past	*So I think wanting to be a couple counsellor was probably a wish to help my parents separate, but it seems I got caught up in some dynamic with the couples about actually trying to keep them together some feeling that I had to keep seeing them was about my own parents; that I had to make them do something*. (C/616-617)
	The disillusioned self	*I think the angry, more difficult couples stayed together longer in a lot of cases, um. So the couples who didn't have ... (and I think often that was the problem, that often they were going round in circles), and I think that is quite disillusioning for the counsellor, and it makes you feel a bit of a failure I suppose* (C/39-44)
A responsibility to manage	A sense of responsibility	*There was definitely a sense of responsibility; that although there was a sense in you that this is hopeless, that responsibility meant you carried on the work* (C/ 181-183)

	Holding boundaries	*You get all that counter transference I suppose and it's not a case of trying to hang onto something; I suppose they were trying to hang onto me in some way, to get some kind of boundary. And it felt quite hard to keep the boundaries sometimes. Sometimes couples would walk out; one of them would walk out. I don't follow them and I find that quite difficult. Usually they would come back* (C/ 140-145)
Coping with the impact	Maintaining a sense of self	*I think I started to avoid taking the couples because I started taking quite a lot of individual people, um. So because, I think there was a certain level at which you can take couples. I have friends who (and we all trained together) and they felt the same and it was a question of how much you could do really, and you could bear* (C/32-39)
	Supervision	*I had great supervision. I used to go weekly (a fabulous guy ...) and he came up with suggestions and I have to say I don't think any of them worked (laughs). I think he was right, but I am not sure that interpreting that to them helped them, um, and that makes you feel pretty helpless, doesn't it* (C/161-166)

Tables of themes for individual participants

Dana

Super ordinate theme	Cluster themes	In vivo quote and line number
Past experience affects the counsellor self	Growing up with a scary father	*Well it is a bit scary, because I grew up with a very angry father* (D/34-36)
	Women are disregarded	*At work I would find, whatever my views were I was disregarded by men. And certainly in family (my family and my husband's family), very much disregarded as being silly, you know. So I imagine he is going to see it like that* (D/112-116)
Difficulties in the work	The anxious self	*There was a couple where I used to feel quite anxious because she used to talk about how angry he got, but he never got angry in the room (at least, he didn't get verbally angry). But I could feel his anger and I could feel that before I identified it. I remember: I used to be quite anxious until I identified it and I suppose I was still anxious then* (D/184-189)
	Physical responses	*Exhaustion* (D/271)
	Fleeting uncertainty	*I think I generally have a moment of panic and I think I'm not going to be able to do this , to hold it together, but it's always been alright* (D/ 36-38)
Professional aspects in the foreground of the work	Understanding	*There is something about cause and effect I think; seeing what has caused the anger. It's like if you can understand the roots of it...is that what I mean? [pause] I know what it is! It is finding the person's vulnerability [pause] Yes, yes, yes, because anger is generally about vulnerability. I got there in the end* (D/232-243)
	Managing self to maintain the professional role	*It's that having the role thing – what is my role? Am I achieving my role? What do I need to do to facilitate this rather than get involved in it?* (D/266-268)
	The authoritative self	*One of the surprising things is finding out that actually in the counselling room the authority of the counsellor does have quite a lot of weight (which people told me but I don't think I really believed that)* (D/ 8-11
Developing as a counsellor	Processing the work	*Sometimes it just causes me to think a lot. It can take me quite a while (I think I am quite a slow processor). So I need a come-down time to digest what people have said and how it's gone. Not in a counselling sense, but more in a gut response kind of way.* (D/271-277)
	Supervision	*The fact that my supervisor is so different from me, really different; that is really helpful. It's like I can be too nice in some way. I don't think I am really, but it can feel like I am ever so nice and my supervisor is less nice, with: "Ah well, what about this, and he did this, and he did that": all the differences between us. We have a most fantastic relationship and that is what makes it great. Our*

		differences are supportive and our relationship is supportive (D/ 334-341)
Personal growth through professional experience	Self-acceptance	*I feel a lot better about myself [pause] I look back at negative experiences in relationships and I don't think they were so much my fault. I think I can look back and think "we were just two people and that's how it was". It's just that things I don't like have just come out of us being different, but not that things are my fault particularly, or even the other person's fault* (D/247-254)
	Self-confidence	[Despite fleeting anxiety] *it's always been alright, which has been a lot of benefit to me in building my confidence and self-esteem I think* (D/38-40)
	A changed relationship with anger	*I am probably less afraid of people who are angry and am also better at identifying it. I think beforehand I used to think people were angry with me when they weren't; they were just concealing something else. And now I sort of see it's not anger, it's something else; it's like a cover up, but there is something else going on really* (D/198-203)

Tables of themes for individual participants

Ella

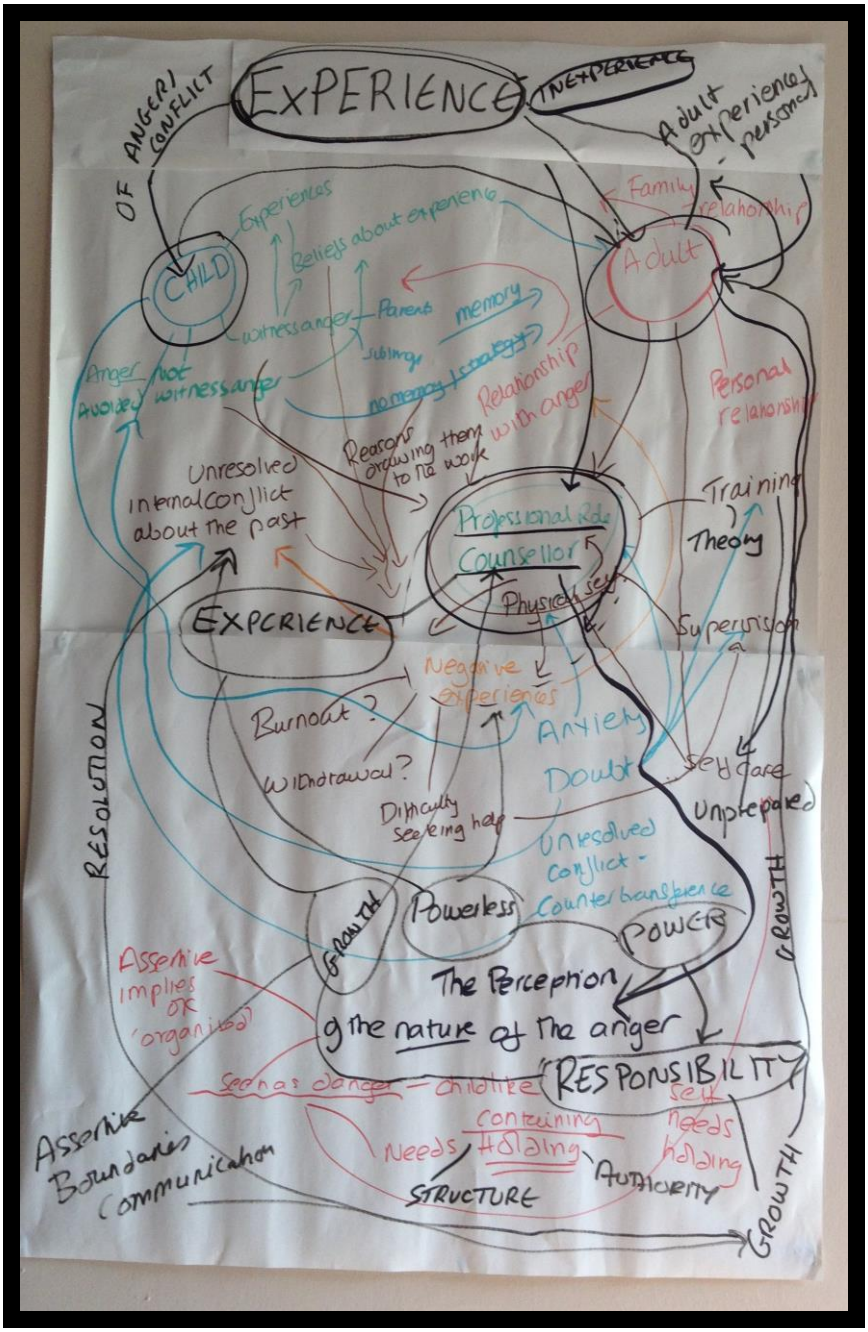
Super ordinate theme	Cluster themes	In vivo quote and line number
Childhood experiences	The avoidant family	*I will do a kind of (me and my family) ... withholding and sulky and broody and banging clanky anger but not that verbal. And I think that that disables me from being OK with anger I think* (E/18-22)
	Beliefs about the destructiveness of anger	*In my family-of-origin it doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman, rows are really difficult because I think there's some kind of message that families break up with rows. It's terribly wounding and really big consequences, so families tend to split and schism and stuff* (E/735-740
The work can arouse difficult emotions	The anxious self	*I think they probably picked up my anxiety about their anger because when they finished counselling they sent me a card saying "been on holiday". It was like a reassurance card. I've never had a reassurance card since, but it felt like it was more for me than for them* (E/172-176)
	The bodily self	*I saw a couple for an assessment and I lost my voice. These are all physical examples, the physical doesn't happen that [pause] these powerful physical don't happen that much, but that's why I am remembering them because they were so powerful. I lost my voice. I couldn't find the words. I couldn't get my thoughts. I could get my thoughts together but I couldn't put them into any coherent [sighs]. And I felt really tongue-tied. ... I couldn't even put words in. I couldn't form sentences to come out.* (E/450-465)
	The doubting self	*I think that as I'm talking to you I'm thinking it sounds I am really shit at this stuff because it feels like I'm thinking all the time: "Oh My God, what will I do if it erupts; what am I going to do with it, what if it does and what if it doesn't." Um and then I was thinking: "this is, this is love as well isn't it? Emotions and human relationships and its part of the work"* (E/404-410)
	Unconscious processes	*I think what happens is that anger will be left with you so if you've got a really angry couple and they are rowing about something that touches me (oh I don't know, housework or something) and it feels like one of them has a really good point I will come home and I will pick a fight with my husband about something that*

		will stay. If it's soon after the session it can linger so it can activate something in your own relationship that strikes a chord. So, yes, I think it's an active emotion anger, so it can kind of flick a switch which we can get animated with (E/ 634-643).
A responsibility to manage	The presence of anger	*I think that [pause] it might be fairly subtle, but there's an awareness begins to happen. And I don't know, I can't remember if that's always been there. I think maybe I'm more aware of it and notice it more but I don't know if that's me having an anger radar and I don't know if that comes from me having an anger radar before I ever became a counsellor, or, or, getting a better anger radar when I'm a counsellor. I'm not sure; it's a kind of a chicken or egg thing. I know [pause] I don't know to be honest, but I think it's [pause] Yes [pause], God, it sounds mystical or something. It's not meant to be. I think there's something about picking up [pause] the emotion in the room before it becomes verbal. So if there was a barometer in the room with emotion rather than temperature, the barometer would be changing – do you know? So it's like that kind of pre-storm thing where you don't notice very much physically, but there is something about the atmosphere that changes. Does that make sense?* (E/289-306)
	The containing self	*Yes it feels like you might step into [pause] as a counsellor might step into ([pause] parental is too strong, but something about stepping into another role because you are in a boundaried place whenever you are trying to draw rules up: It may be about anger or boundaries about anger in the session. Because what you are trying to do also is model something about what's OK and not OK. And it's not OK that they verbally abuse each other. I suppose technically what people do in their own homes is up to them, although they do have a responsibility as parents. But whenever you are in the counselling room there is something about letting it go on a bit to see how it's like, but I think we have got a responsibility to respectfulness between our clients and for ourselves in our counselling. So yes I think you step into something more authoritative to do the boundary bit and the rules and what's OK and what's not OK. [Long pause], like you do with safety and child protection. It's that part of you that is less on the therapeutic side and more on the safety and ethics* (E/113-118)
Managing the impact	Supervision	[The agency's] supervision *is brilliant, because you do have access very soon afterwards on the phone. You don't have to wait for another supervision date. So there is immediate support if you need it. So if you're carrying stuff. If you find you're carrying stuff, being able to let it go or*

		discharge it in supervision is really helpful. Because it feels like the clients have held it and given it to you and you can give it to another person and let go and therefore let go and maybe be reassured or normalised and have a bit of a clue as to what to do next time or you know that kind of, (pause) I suppose the supervisor holds the authority somewhere in that (E/553-564)
	Maintaining a sense of self	*I think you, I think there's a holding that happens, because like I said you are trying to contain. There is a kind of; there's a real vitality about it; there's a sort of energy about anger. The session goes really fast and there's a real - there's a real dynamism about it. But then you're left with it before your next client. So what was really nice in my last centre was you had a counsellor's room and you could go in and go "Oh, Jesus, you will never believe what happened!" you see, so you are able to let go a bit on site before you had to be: "I'm fine, I'm thinking about you" for my next clients. Writing up the notes (the process notes) is really helpful to get it out. Because if I was left holding anger and I felt I was feeling misused or abused or maltreated in the room by the client, I could let go of that. So I wasn't carrying it* (E/504-517)
The developed self	Developing confidence in working with anger	*Yes, if it's in the relationship it has to be in the room because there's something chilling about the couples who never row with each other. You know those couples that don't fight; it worries me because next I wonder where is their anger? [pause] Difficult because anger [pause], difficult [pause], because anger, the emotion of anger is just an emotion (E/417-421)*
	A changed relationship with anger	*So yes, I think what I have learnt to do is to take back some of the anger that I didn't own. I think I am better at owning it now; more likely to do the getting angry bit and less likely to do the sulky stroppy bit. Yes, so I haven't been able to change the way my family of origin do it but I think I've changed the way I do it with my husband, my family or friends* (E/710-727)

Appendix 21

Developing Master Themes



Appendix 22

Examples of Participants Contributions to Master Themes

Super-ordinate theme: **CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES**					
Subtheme:	Anna	Beth	Cath	Dana	Ella
Anger behaviours	*Expressing anger? I didn't, my mum didn't express anger, so it feels more risky when it is a woman. (A/216-232)*	*...it's torture to live with that; to have someone who is very, um, self-depriving of things, uncomfortable to be with, but all fuelled by anger (B/403-407)*	*[Herself and her sister:] we watched an angry couple I suppose; we watched an angry couple. (C/631-633)*	*I found my dad scary until the day he died when I was in my thirties (D/304)*	*... in my family if there are cross words you are exiled for ten years and things; so big consequences to anger (E/677-679)*
Anger beliefs	*I can survive anger (which of course as a child I didn't think) (A/140)*	*[Mother] was quite critical and controlling. So in some ways it must have resonated with that a bit, that sense that I was doing my best and trying and despite that he was furious and stormed off (B/42-47)*	*[Believing that for angry couples] deep down there must be a feeling that something can get resolved(C/ 66-74)*	*[Angry men have] the physical advantage generally. I haven't met many men who are weaker than me (D/147-148)*	*You know, you can destroy something that will never be fixed again (743-749)*

Super-ordinate theme: **THE DISRUPTED SELF**					
	Anna	Beth	Cath	Dana	Ella
Subtheme: **The anxious self**	*had got into then was a this child-self that was feeling helpless and paralysed (A/289)*	*I don't think it showed, but I would have been panicking about what to do next, what to say next, how to change it, ameliorate it.(B/94-96)*	*But the anger was frightening, so at first I would think; Wow!"(C/204-205)*	*So, for example he (the client); hitting me, breaking something: those sorts of thoughts (D:50-52)*	*I think my biggest fear at that time was: "God: are they going to split up?" Or, "will this all end in disaster? (E/144-149)*
The bodily self	*I feel it in my body I can feel it in my stomach and my chest area (A/236-237)*	*... a bodily sensation of sort of, it hits me here in the solar plexus; I can feel it ... maybe I'm scared, but probably now I am just picking up theirs (B/81-90)*	*... all that energy you put into the work, because it can be exhausting, can't it be? Yes, the exhaustion of working with angry couples. (C: 665-667)*	*Probably in my chest and a shaking I suppose (D/46-47)*	*... you leave a session and you feel like you have been in a boxing ring yourself in some way (E/42-45)*
The doubting self	*I ended up sort of being in a critical parent self: "you should have done this, you should have been able to do this"... And I kind of slipped into "I have to get over this" (A/297-302)*	*"Oh my God, what have I done?" Somehow it seemed to be my fault (B/49)*	*There was definitely a sense of responsibility; that although there was a sense in you that this is hopeless, that responsibility meant you carried on the work (C/181-183*	*I generally have a moment of panic and I think I'm not going to be able to do this , to hold it together (D/36-37)*	*I'm thinking it sounds I am really shit at this stuff because it feels like I'm thinking all the time: "Oh My God, what will I do if it erupts (E/404-408)*
The conflicted self	*I get moments of being helpless with that ... there was stuff about transference there (A:/42-45)*	Not a contributor	*... some feeling that I had to keep seeing them was about my own parents; that I had to make them do something. (C/.616-617)*	Not a contributor	*I couldn't form sentences to come out. And it was as if I got choked (E: 461-464)*

Super-ordinate theme: **A RESPONSIBILITY TO MANAGE**					
Subtheme:	Anna	Beth	Cath	Dana	Ella
The presence of anger	*One thing it means, which is quite a good thing in the room is that it means we have something to work with (A/72)*	*You understand it better, even though the out- of-controlness of it and the noise of it I don't like it at all (B/143-146)*	*..not only were they angry in the relationship, they were angry in the room too (C/67-68)*	*... there is something about taking a deep breath and stepping back (D/64-65)*	*I think it's in me (pause) I think before it erupts [pause] because, you know, I think there's a there's a build before it kind of [clicks fingers] gets verbal, (E:273-276)*
The containing self	*What I notice is that kind of rational professional self comes up and kind of says "right we are going to stop this and have a look at what's going on". (A/246-249)*	Not a contributor	*They just want containing actually. I think they want to be angry in the room so they don't hit each other. And I think a lot of them, and they would say that; "we only argue here you know" because it is the only safe place to argue(C/352-355)*	*I am surprised by the power of the counsellor in the room. (D/20)*	*I think the warm authority is about appreciating that there are going to be hard emotions in relationships but appealing to their better bits about what to do about it as well. (E/91-102)*
Holding onto self	*I think I end up having more of a sense of responsibility; that sense of wanting to help and responsibility and, um, remaining professional, but also being open to your own feelings and having to nurture yourself (A: 340-343)*	*An understanding of your own emotions and keeping that boundary; that is theirs and this is me. I don't have to take on all of this; I can observe it over there. So perhaps it is that; to observe more than to absorb. (B/172-175)*	*I think you have to hang onto your sanity with some angry couples. I think you've got to hang onto your boundaries, um; making sure you keep yourself sane C/240-242)*	*What do I need to do to facilitate this rather than get involved in it?* (D/266-268)	Not a contributor

Super-ordinate theme: **MANAGING THE IMPACT**

Subtheme:	Anna	Beth	Cath	Dana	Ella
Supervision	*[on training] It gave the tools for being able to get objective views of things and to take a step back and stuff, but not in terms of being prepared for the sort of emotional impact and making sense of those; supervision has been more important for that9A/373-376)*	*The supervisor then in my mind held a different role in my mind, about whether I got it right or wrong. So maybe I would not be able to use supervision in the same way I did now Whereas now I would say: "Oh God I had this terrible couple" (B/291-298)*	*I tried to find another supervisor who I thought would be more supportive. I think mine was going away and I didn't find him very helpful. Someone recommended someone and I actually went to the woman and she ended up as my therapist (C/297-300)*	*[The benefits of supervision in working with angry couples] Just knowing it's there. Just knowing the support is there (D/344)*	*Because it feels like the clients have held it and given it to you and you can give it to another person and let go and therefore let go and maybe be reassured or normalised and have a bit of a clue as to what to do next time (E/553-564*)
Maintaining a sense of self	*I have that dialogue with that child-self afterwards, usually after the evening is over and I travel on public transport - so usually, when I am travelling on the bus or I walk back. I journal as well. (A/118-122*)	Not a contributor	*I think my own therapy helped a lot and helped me deal with my internal couple a lot and she helped me see things.... I think I was trying to resolve things in the work I did (C/ 506-510)*	*I need a come-down time to digest what people have said and how it's gone. Not in a counselling sense, but more in a gut response kind of way (D: 271-277)*	*Because there's something about an emotional response in the process notes... It's like an in-between stage but I think they are also for the counsellor; for their mental health. (E/545-549)*

Super-ordinate theme: **THE DEVELOPED SELF**

Subtheme:	Anna	Beth	Cath	Dana	Ella
Developing confidence	*I think for me conflict is one of the major issues that I have had to face in terms of how I manage it .... getting in touch with my own feelings of anger. That had a major impact. (A/170-175)*	*Compared with earlier in my counselling career I felt more in control of it and more able to deal with it, although she is so out of control and shouts so much (B/117-119)*	Not a contributor	*... it's always been alright, which has been a lot of benefit to me in building my confidence and self-esteem I think (D/39-40)*	*I think, I don't think comfortable is the right word. I think I'm more OK with it and I can still keep my professional self going [pause], in a counselling way (E/4-6)*
A changed relationship with anger	*One thing I know I have done differently in this relationship, compared past relationships is, um, being clearer on boundaries and setting boundaries. And I think there's been some modelling for him with that.. (A:185-189)*	*I'm not so upset by people being angry, um, but is it working with angry couples or is it maturity? because I can't think how working with a couple could change how I relate to other people; it might, but I don't see that it would do (B/311-312)*	Not a contributor	*And with couples; obviously I have worked with men and my view of men has changed a lot (D/167-168)*	*I think what I have learnt to do is to take back some of the anger that I didn't own. I think I am better at owning it now; more likely to do the getting angry bit and less likely to do the sulky stroppy bit ... I think I've changed the way I do it with my husband, my family or friends (E: 689-695)*

Appendix 23

Postscript

My expectation is that few readers will reach this point, so I wish to thank you for your interest.

One of my participants told me that completing her Masters was one of the best things she had ever done, and she hoped I would feel the same at the end. That was inspiring to hear. I have finally reached that end, and I also feel this has been an important part of my life. At times I despaired of ever completing this, and without the encouragement and support I have received I may not have done. Research can sometimes feel a lonely process, however in writing the acknowledgements at the beginning I suddenly grasped how many lives this had touched and how a whole community has contributed to the completion of this study.

I have climbed mountains of meaning during this research and now need a little rest. The mountain will look different when further away and the ideas are bound to change, but this has been a valuable learning experience for me. I hope others also find value in this study.